

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 9 October 2024
15th Meeting, 2024 (Session 6)

PE1931: Improve the R100 rollout by prioritising properties who currently have speeds of less than 5 Mbps

Introduction

Petitioner Ian Barker

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to prevent digital exclusion for rural properties and their households by giving priority in the R100 programme to properties with internet speeds of less than 5 Mbps.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1931>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 22 November 2023.](#) At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Scottish Government and Openreach.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new written submissions from the Petitioner, the Scottish Government, and Openreach, which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage.](#)
5. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. [The Scottish Government gave its initial response to the petition on 31 March 2022.](#)
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 68 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

8. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
October 2024

Annexe A: Summary of petition

PE1931: Improve the R100 rollout by prioritising properties who currently have speeds of less than 5 Mbps

Petitioner

Ian Barker

Date Lodged

7 March 2022

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to prevent digital exclusion for rural properties and their households by giving priority in the R100 programme to properties with internet speeds of less than 5 Mbps.

Previous action

Written to my MSP and MP.

I have had an article published in the local newspaper explaining the problems.

Background information

I live in a property which lies 800 m from fibre. We applied for a community partnership which quoted over £100000 for 6 houses. We are connected by copper back to box number 3 which in turn is connected to Lhanbryde exchange by copper.

Last year a new cabinet was installed on the B9103. This meant running fibre less than 1 metre away from cabinet number 3. The fibre runs down the B9103 and under the minor road to Scotstonhill. This is 800m to my property.

We are apparently not in the scope for fibre or even a new cabinet at the junction to the Scotstonhill road, yet properties who already have speeds of 70 Mbps are being upgraded to 900 Mbps.

This is digital exclusion. Rural households should have fair access to the internet supplier market rather than being restricted to expensive alternative solutions.

Vouchers provide only expensive solutions and don't allow households fair access to the whole internet provider market, again exclusion.

Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1931 on 22 November 2023

The Convener: PE1931 is about improving the reaching 100 per cent—R100—programme roll-out by prioritising properties that currently have speeds of less than 5 megabits per second. The petition, lodged by Ian Barker, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to prevent digital exclusion for rural properties and their households. We last considered the petition on 8 March, when we agreed to write to the Scottish Government.

For context, Ofcom research found that 10Mbps of download speed was the minimum speed that is needed to meet an average household's digital needs. That speed was set back in 2018. The Scottish Government response indicates that superfast broadband access has been made available to 62,000 more premises since 2022, and it states that the networks that are being delivered will support download speeds of up to 1,000Mbps. The submission also provides details about the Scotland full fibre charter.

Do members have any comments or suggestions as to how we might proceed?

Fergus Ewing: When I was looking at the papers on the committee website, perhaps I missed it, but I could not see any response from the petitioner to the written submissions from Openreach and the Scottish Government. I wonder whether that is correct, because that surprised me a little.

The Convener: Yes, that is correct.

Fergus Ewing: I thought that the petitioner might respond. The issue will affect a lot of people—I think that the petitioner is from Lhanbryde in Morayshire, in the Highlands and Islands. I am familiar with the Openreach argument about the inside-out approach versus the outside-in approach, but I think that the petitioner is arguing that a more sophisticated and flexible approach could be taken. As we have not had any response from him, I wonder whether—

The Convener: The petitioner was given the opportunity to contribute but has chosen not to.

Fergus Ewing: If that is the case, perhaps we should close the petition—

The Convener: There are some further actions that we might consider taking.

Fergus Ewing: Are there?

The Convener: Yes.

Fergus Ewing: Okay.

The Convener: Do colleagues have any suggestions?

David Torrance: We could write to BT Openreach to ask whether, in light of information that work is sequenced from the primary exchange location out to communities, it considers areas with low speeds in the surrounding communities

when determining which primary exchange locations to prioritise. Our papers contain a list of other questions, so we could just add them, convener.

The Convener: Are we content to do that?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you. We will keep the petition open and make further inquiries. It might well be that the petitioner will contribute further in light of any information that we receive.

Annexe C: Written submissions

Petitioner submission of 22 November 2023

PE1931/E: Improve the R100 rollout by prioritising properties who currently have speeds of less than 5 Mbps

I have a number of reasons as to why I have not responded to my petition, but here is my response for the committee now:

1. I have been very busy looking after elderly parents
2. I have lost all faith that I will ever be upgraded to more than copper back to the exchange and become very disheartened indeed. I keep being given promises and dates and these promises and dates keep pushed back. It really does feel like digital exclusion. I have less than 5 mbps yet those who already have adequate speeds are being upgraded to superfast GB speeds. I can't watch BBC iPlayer, something most people take for granted.

There appears to be so much smoke and mirrors about all of this, voucher schemes etc are just sticking plasters. I am less than 3 miles from Elgin, fibre is only 800m away, in fact it passes cabinet 3 which I am connected to.

I do hope that one day, I might get to 10 mbps, a speed that the majority in Scotland now would consider inadequate, I would be satisfied.

I am increasingly being excluded from the ISP market place as many operators will only offer fibre.

Scottish Government submission of 20 December 2023

PE1931/F: Improve the R100 rollout by prioritising properties who currently have speeds of less than 5 Mbps

Thank you for your letter dated 24 November 2023 requesting additional information regarding Scotland's Full Fibre Charter, and information relating to households not in commercial or R100 contract build plans, the R100 voucher scheme, and what support is available for communities with low internet speeds. The answers to these questions are set out below.

You asked:

- how areas of priority and areas of opportunity (as noted in a recent submission) are identified in practice.

The Full Fibre Charter for Scotland commits the Scottish Government to work with Charter signatories to identify areas not yet enabled for full fibre connectivity, and to consider how commercial investment in Scotland's digital infrastructure can be accelerated.

A key way we do this is through ensuring Charter signatory participation in the Scottish Government's rolling Open Market Review (OMR). The rolling OMR involves the regular collection and analysis of data from broadband providers on

their delivered and planned build in Scotland. This data allows us to see which specific addresses are currently covered by broadband suppliers active in Scotland, and which premises they plan to provide a service to in the future. Based on this information, the Scottish Government can ensure that the right areas are targeted for any potential government investment.

Signatories to Scotland's Full Fibre Charter commit to working with Scottish Government on OMR data returns to assist in the identification and prioritisation of potential areas for investment in improved connectivity.

Regarding the identification of opportunities, the Full Fibre Charter commits the Scottish Government to work within the public sector to promote greater full fibre connectivity.

Recent Scottish Government activity in this area has focused on facilitating greater levels of engagement between Local Authorities and Charter signatories, primarily through the Scottish Government's Digital Connectivity Single Points of Contact (SPOCs) network.

SPOCs are officer representatives in Scottish Local Authorities who lead for their Council on engagement with Scottish Government on digital connectivity programmes. The Scottish Government has a strategic focus on developing mutually beneficial relationships with Local Authorities, with regular two-way engagements throughout the year, including online and in-person events, a digital connectivity newsletter, as well as year-round ad-hoc engagement with SPOCs as appropriate.

We have sought to utilise these channels to facilitate greater engagement between Full Fibre Charter signatories and all 32 Scottish Local Authorities. Activity in this area has included presentations from Charter signatories at online SPOC events, the inclusion of a Charter signatory networking session at our 6-monthly in-person events, as well as ad-hoc activity when appropriate. We have also shared the contact details of consenting SPOCs with Charter signatories to allow for direct engagement between both parties to help overcome any barriers to digital infrastructure deployment.

Additionally, the Scottish Government has sought opportunities to promote fibre broadband connectivity through our own mobile infrastructure initiative, the £28.75M Scottish 4G Infill programme (S4GI), which is providing 4G mobile phone coverage to 55 mobile "notspots" across the country.

The fibre deployed to connect the S4GI mobile phone masts, known as 'backhaul', can also be utilised to provide broadband to homes and businesses. By investing in fibre backhaul to as many mast sites as possible, the Scottish Government has enabled the connection of premises to fibre broadband in hard-to-reach areas without existing access. For example, on Jura, fibre backhaul provided for two mobile phone masts deployed through the S4GI programme has enabled the provision of full fibre broadband to over 200 premises on the island.

You also asked:

- how many households are not in or unlikely to be in commercial or R100 contract plans and:

- of those households, what proportion of eligible households have applied for the voucher scheme; and
- what support is available to help individuals understand the voucher scheme and options for pooling vouchers within a community.
- beyond the voucher scheme, how the Scottish Government plans to support communities with low internet speeds that are not in or unlikely to be in commercial or R100 contract plans, in particular whether consideration has been given to directly funding improvements on a community basis rather than through individual vouchers.

Approximately 52,000 properties in Scotland currently remain eligible for a voucher worth up to £5,000 through the R100 Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (R100 SBVS). Our latest available figures, as of 1 December 2023, show that a total of 3,639 connections offering, as a minimum, superfast broadband speed of 30 megabits per second, have been delivered through utilisation of vouchers through the R100 SBVS. At present, around a further 460 vouchers have been issued, with approximately a further 100 vouchers requested.

We also encourage our R100 contract delivery partner, Openreach, to go further while they are in areas delivering those contracts. This is known as “contractual overspill” and is not funded as part of the R100 contracts. Our most recent figures show an additional 8,653 premises have been connected through overspill, a number of which would have been previously eligible for a voucher through the R100 SBVS.

On the issue of support to help individuals and communities understand and utilise the scheme to secure connections, our Scotland Superfast website is an incredibly useful resource, with the information at <https://scotlandsuperfast.com/vouchers/find-a-supplier/> detailing every step of the journey, and allowing individuals to check which suppliers have indicated that they can deliver connections in each Scottish Local Authority area.

Our online enquiry form allows members of the public to ask any additional questions which may not be covered by the extensive material available on the website, and our team of R100 Deployment Managers is also available to provide advice and assistance, where possible.

Funding for connections delivered by the R100 SBVS is sent directly to the voucher applicant’s chosen registered suppliers – but only once the build is complete and the connection is live.

Alongside provision of information to the public, we also work proactively with registered R100 SBVS suppliers to identify opportunities for them to extend networks and engage with communities in order drive uptake of vouchers. R100 SBVS has been designed to allow vouchers in a community to be combined to extend available funding, with the majority of R100 SBVS projects involving some pooling of vouchers.

Of course, it is worth noting that the Scottish Government is delivering this support through the R100 programme, despite telecommunications in the UK being wholly reserved to the UK Government (UKG) in Westminster, and we expect UKG-led

digital interventions to play a significant role in delivering high-quality and future-proofed digital connectivity across Scotland. UKG recently consulted on its plans to launch a scheme aimed at supporting where properties are considered to be 'Very Hard to Reach' (VHTR). Their own Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme (GBVS) also remains available for those eligible and, in some cases, can be combined with our own R100 SBVS vouchers to provide up to £9,500 with which to secure a Gigabit-capable connection.

We also expect that commercial investment will continue to play an important part in extending high-quality connectivity across Scotland, and we are encouraged by ongoing discussions with commercial suppliers which suggest that they will continue to invest in and extend their existing networks. The continued expansion of Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite services also means that a commercial broadband service offering up to ultrafast speeds is now available to anyone in Scotland who wants one.

I trust that this information proves useful to the Committee.

Digital Connectivity Division

Openreach submission of 22 December 2023

PE1931/G: Improve the R100 rollout by prioritising properties who currently have speeds of less than 5 Mbps

We thank the Committee for getting in touch with us to respond to the further questions posed at its meeting on 22nd November 2023. Please find our responses below.

Q1: In light of information that work is sequenced from the primary exchange location out to communities, whether Openreach considers areas with low speeds in the surrounding communities when determining which primary exchange locations to prioritise.

Yes, we do. As outlined in our previous response dated 1st March 2023, we design and build the network in the most efficient way possible to meet the requirements of the R100 programme. These are sequenced to meet the contractual time commitments, which are specific to intervention area contracted premises. There are 114,869 premises to be delivered across 3 contract lots (North, Central and South). Those premises were identified as having speeds of less than 24mpbs and our goal is to connect them as quickly as possible.

We routinely review the sequencing of our build programme to identify if any additional build can be brought into the programme. This additional build is not specific to, or included in the contract, but because of this continuous review, we have been able to deliver to around 25% more premises than contracted within the R100 programme.

We also consistently look to take on any opportunities to utilise the Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (SBVS) and Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme (GBVS) funding to extend coverage further, delivering to even more additional premises.

Q2. Whether households with speeds of less than 5 Mbps which sit nearby to an existing fibre area, like the petitioner who lives 800m from fibre, can apply for connection to that area.

The Scotland Superfast website (www.scotlandsuperfast.com) outlines at premise level who is in plan and if so, when they are due to be build to. We have not been asked by the Scottish Government to prioritise any specific premises below 5mps but are instead driven to maximise coverage and reach in the most efficient way possible.

We appreciate the build plan is set over a number of years and some individuals will want a solution before their R100 delivery date. We would recommend for those who are not in the R100 plan within the next 12 months and have speeds less than 10mbps, to check if they are eligible for the universal service obligation. They may be able to receive support from BT through either a mobile, fixed wireless or full fibre solution. Further information can be found at: www.bt.com/broadband/USO.