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:*

- o *of those households, what proportion of eligible households have applied for the voucher scheme; and*

- o *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