

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition PE2199: Facilitate access to emergency telephone services for remote communities, lodged by Timothy Bowles

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

The petitioner is concerned that more remote and isolated communities in Scotland should be provided with a reliable alternative to usual options in the event of a complete power failure.

As in many areas, traditional 'landlines' have been replaced with 'Voice over Internet Protocol' (VoIP) arrangements, which use a broadband internet connection to make 'phone calls, converting voice into digital signals, rather than traditional physical telephone line infrastructure. The traditional telephone network is referred to as the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN).

The petitioner argues that in remote areas, in the event of a power cut, internet connectivity is lost and battery backup for routers and 4G are not adequate, stating also that the local 4G mast uses the same electricity supply as householders, and does not have adequate battery back-up.

It should be noted that Telecommunications is a reserved power under the terms of [Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998](#). The [House of Commons Library published a briefing in March 2024 on 'Building broadband and mobile infrastructure'](#). However, there could be means by which the Scottish Government could provide support to communities that do not have internet resilience, reliable coverage or signal or are more prone to power cuts.

Seil Island comes within the Argyll and Bute local authority area.

Recent Power Cut Examples

The events the petitioner is concerned about have occurred on several occasions in Scotland. [Consumer Scotland](#) states that during storm Éowyn in January 2025, over 200,000 properties lost power with almost 6,000 still without power three days later.

[During Storm Amy](#) in October 2025, residents of Callender experienced power cuts that meant they were unable to call 999.

Current Advice for Power Cuts

[Scottish Fire and Rescue Service](#) provides advice on steps to take if a power cut happens. The first step on their website is, however, to report online or by phone. This would not be possible if a power cut were to happen that effected the 4G masts as explained by the petitioner.

The [UK Government Prepare Campaign](#) also provides advice on power cuts. Similarly, a key part is to report the power cut via internet or phone. This site also gives advice on how to prepare for losing internet and mobile signal. This advice includes contacting your landline provider who may give you a free solution such as a battery backup unit which would allow you to call emergency services if needed.

Current Consumer Mitigations

Battery Back Up (BBU) units are available to buy for some providers. These units will keep a customer's broadband and digital home phone working during a power cut but only for up to an hour. These are priced between £50 and £200.

Satellite phones are also available to consumers although at a much higher price ~ £1000. These allow phone calls to be made through satellite connection and are battery powered.

Consumer Scotland

[Consumer Scotland](#) is a Non-Ministerial Office, independent of the Scottish Government and accountable to the Scottish Parliament since 2022.

In [December 2023 they published analysis on the impact of the switch to broadband internet calling \(VoIP\)](#). They state that Openreach, the company, and subsidiary of BT Group, that builds and maintains telecommunications infrastructure in the UK, and sells network services to broadband and phone providers, has withdrawn its line rental products that rely on PSTN this year. Telephone lines have been transferred to Internet Protocol (IP) based networks. Virgin Media also intends to retire its PSTN in line with Openreach.

Consumer Scotland highlights that this digital system will only work in a power cut with battery back-up, unlike traditional corded telephones.

The change is industry-led rather than government led and the switch is happening/happened over time according to companies' plans.

In areas or for individuals with no mobile, internet or mobile signal, providers must offer a solution for the event of a power cut, such as battery back up for a minimum of an hour's access to emergency services. The issue is not peculiar to remote and rural areas, but these do tend to be the areas where connectivity is most vulnerable.

Ofcom

Ofcom is the UK's regulator for the communications services. [Ofcom published a report](#) in February 2025 detailing their modelling and analysis of the resilience of mobile networks in the event of a sustained UK—wide power outage. This report estimates that the costs to upgrade mobile networks to ensure almost everyone can maintain access to the emergency services for up to 4 hours would be approximately £1 billion.

Additionally, they state higher cost would be incurred to increase network hardening. The report also highlights that there is not yet international best practice, with different countries having different requirements for rural/urban, number of sites, length of time.

'Direct to Device' satellite communication is also described in the report. However, it states "capacity and timescales of such approaches need further investigation before they can be considered viable alternatives to current mobile backup measures".

Kelly Eagle, Senior Researcher

03 December 2025

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

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