Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 19 February 2025
3rd Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

PE2127: Develop a new Digital Connectivity Plan for the Highlands and Islands

Introduction

Petitioner   John Robert Erskine

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to develop a new Digital Connectivity Plan for the Highlands and Islands that aims to:

- address digital infrastructure gaps
- improve mobile internet coverage
- establish public-private partnerships
- support economic growth, education and healthcare

Webpage   https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2127

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 28 November 2024.

2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.

3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.

4. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 100 signatures have been received on this petition.

5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered.

6. The Committee has also been considering petition PE1931: Improve the R100 rollout by prioritising properties who currently have speeds of less than 5 Mbps.

7. The Committee has received submissions from the Scottish Government, the Petitioner, and Rhoda Grant MSP, which are set out in **Annexe C** of this paper.

Action

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

Clerks to the Committee
February 2025

Annexe A: Summary of petition

Petitioner

John Robert Erskine

Date Lodged

28 November 2024

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to develop a new Digital Connectivity Plan for the Highlands and Islands that aims to:

- address digital infrastructure gaps
- improve mobile internet coverage
- establish public-private partnerships
- support economic growth, education and healthcare

Background information

The Scottish Government should introduce a new comprehensive Digital Connectivity Plan specifically designed for the Highlands and Islands.

Despite progress, rural and island communities still face significant broadband and mobile coverage gaps, impacting local businesses, healthcare, education, and quality of life. 25% of Shetland households experience speeds under 30Mbps, and mobile service is unreliable in many areas, reducing opportunities for growth and tourism. The upcoming retirement of copper phone lines by 2027 and the shutdown of radio teleswitch meters by 2025 adds urgency to the situation.

This petition urges investment in digital infrastructure, public-private partnerships, and regular progress updates to improve coverage and bridge the digital divide.

Enhancing connectivity will enable economic development, support remote healthcare services, and improve educational access, ensuring these communities can thrive in the modern economy.

Annexe B: SPICe briefing on PE2127

SPICe **The Information Centre**
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

The petitioner is calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to develop a new Digital Connectivity Plan for the Highlands and Islands that aims to:

- Address digital infrastructure gaps.
- Improve mobile internet coverage.
- Establish public-private partnerships.
- Support economic growth, education and healthcare.

Background

Digital connectivity in the Highlands and Islands

Ofcom's Connected Nations Scotland Report 2024 provides an insight into digital connectivity across Scotland. 62% of residential properties, as of July 2024, have access to full-fibre networks in Scotland. This is an increase of nine percentage points (265,000 premises) from September 2023 to July 2024. 77% of Scottish households have gigabit-capable coverage (download speeds of 1+ Gbit/s), representing a 5% increase in 2023.

96% of Scottish residences have superfast coverage (download speeds of 30+ mbit/s). Scottish rural areas recorded a 4% increase in superfast coverage over the year; the largest increase of any geographic area in the UK. 0.5% (16,000) premises in Scotland cannot access decent broadband (at least 10Mbit/s download and 1 Mbit/s upload speeds).

However, rural Scotland is at a disadvantage when compared to urban settings and other UK countries. In Scotland, 99% of urban residencies have superfast coverage, whereas 83% of rural residences do. This is lower than rural areas in England (90%), Northern Ireland (95%) and Wales (87%).

Similarly, Scottish residencies in a rural setting have lower levels of gigabit capable and full fibre connectivity than urban settings. In Scotland, 85% of urban residencies have gigabit capable connections and 67% have full fibre. Whereas only 43% of rural residencies have gigabit capable connections and 42% have full fibre.

Some areas of the Highlands and Islands are most severely disadvantaged in this regard. Whilst 89% of Midlothian and Glasgow City residencies have full fibre connection only 14% of Orkney and 11% of Shetland do.

The report found that programmes to enhance mobile connectivity in rural Scotland are making significant progress. At least one Mobile Network Operator (MNO) now covers 89% of landmass in Scotland, up 5% on 2023. All four MNOs cover 65% of

Scotland, up 17% on 2023. Scotland continues to have the lowest 4G coverage across the nations, but it has recorded the highest growth in this measure.

11% of Scotland's landmass are "not spots" (no 4/5G coverage). This is higher than England (1%), Northern Ireland (2%) and Wales (5%). However, the amount of not spots in Scotland has gone down 5% between 2023 and 2024.

Scottish Government's policy approach to digital connectivity

The Scottish Government's 2021 Digital Strategy, titled: A Changing Nation: How Scotland will Thrive in a Digital World sets out government measures that aim to ensure that Scotland will fulfil its potential in a constantly evolving digital world.

Part one of this strategy focuses on people and place. It states: "Geography, background or ability should not be barriers to getting online and benefiting from digital technology." To this end, the strategy commits to improving rural 4G mobile coverage, delivering broadband coverage for all amongst other policy priorities.

Enhancing Scotland's digital infrastructure was also a cornerstone of the Scottish Government's 2022 10-year National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET).

Under the duty to prepare an Islands plan, in part 2 of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, improving digital connectivity was one of the outcomes sought for islands communities. The National Islands Plan itself was published in 2019. The plan states: "the implementation of the Plan will align with, and build on, existing digital strategies, specifically Scotland's overarching Digital Strategy."

The plan includes a list of strategic objectives on digital connectivity. For example, it calls on the UK Government to prioritise early investment in Scotland's islands as part of their plans for full fibre roll-out by 2025 - as well as calling on Ofcom to address the issues faced by island communities when designing telecoms regulation and policy.

Scottish Government's digital connectivity projects

In April 2024, the Scottish Government announced that a broadband connection milestone had been reached. They announced that more than one million faster broadband connections had been delivered to homes and businesses across Scotland, backed by £1 billion of publicly driven investment.

A key enabler of this was the £463 million Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband (DSSB) programme launched in 2014. This was funded in partnership with the UK Government, Scottish Local Authorities, BT, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE). The build was completed in 2020 and connected more than 950,600 premises to fibre-based broadband which was over 150,00 more than originally anticipated.

Reaching 100% (R100) is a Scottish Government programme aimed at bringing faster broadband access to thousands of homes and businesses across the country. R100 is a programme funded primarily by the Scottish Government (£591m) with investment from the UK Government (£52m) and BT (£53m) who appointed

Openreach to deliver the network. It is aimed at connecting around 113,000 properties in North, South and Central Scotland.

In October 2024:

- over 68,000 premises had been connected as a result of R100, including R100 contracts, R100 Scottish Broadband Voucher Schemes (SBVS) which offer a subsidy for premises not covered by R100 contracts, and additional premises which were not in the contracts but have been connected as a result of R100 contract build

- build had been completed for more than 15,000 homes and businesses in the R100 North contract area

- build was either completed or underway on 13 Scottish islands, with another 10 at the pre-build survey phase

- over 4,600 premises had used the Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme

- R100 activity had taken place in all 32 Scottish local authorities

On 8 January 2024, the Economy and Fair Work Committee conducted budget scrutiny for the 2025-26 budget. The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic stated: "from 2025-26, we will also be delivering project gigabit in Scotland, with capital funding that is provided by the UK Government. That will complement the transformational work that has already been done by the R100 programme [...] Project gigabit is a £5 billion UK Government programme with a target to provide access to gigabit-capable broadband for at least 85 per cent of UK premises by 2025, and nationwide coverage by 2030."

The Scottish 4G Infill Programme (S4GI) is a £28.75 million initiative delivering 3G infrastructure and services in 55 mobile "not spots" in rural and island parts of Scotland. S4GI is being delivered in partnership with WHP Telecoms, Cellnex UK and the Scottish Futures Trust. A progress update on mast sites can be found here.

The Scottish Government has also funded the Scotland 5G centre, which is the national centre for accelerating the deployment and adoption of 5G connectivity in Scotland's Industry and public sector. This centre supports a regional network of 5G innovation hubs to facilitate widespread deployment of 5G.

Threats to connectivity

Upcoming changes to communication systems stress the need for digital connectivity. For example, on the 30 June 2025 the Radio Teleswitch service will be shut down. This service uses radio signals to tell some electricity meters to switch between peak and off-peak rates.

Additionally, Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) and Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) are expected to be turned off by the end of January 2027. This is the switch from physical copper-based landlines to internet-based

services across the UK. Following this, all phones will use Voice Over Internet Protocol technology.

Euan Ross, Senior Researcher, SPICe

21 January 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

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

Annexe C: Written submissions

Scottish Government written submission, 20 December 2024

PE2127/A: Develop a new Digital Connectivity Plan for the Highlands and Islands

While the area of telecommunications is reserved to the UK Parliament under the provisions of the Scotland Act 1998, the Scottish Government has stepped in and played a lead role in enhancing Scotland's digital infrastructure using the Scottish Government's own resources, given the economic importance of digital connectivity in Scotland. Effective digital connectivity can ensure that our rural and islands communities are an integral part of the economic, social, and environmental wellbeing of Scotland.

The growing combination of terrestrial and non-terrestrial digital solutions forms a comprehensive toolkit ensuring that everyone, regardless of their location, can play a full part in the digital economy.

A core theme of Scotland's Digital Strategy is ensuring that no one is left behind in the digital world and that geography should not be a barrier to getting online. By focussing investment in extending the reach of digital infrastructure even further into Scotland's rural communities we are ensuring we meet that objective. The Scottish Government's NSET 10-year plan includes a strong commitment to provide an efficient and resilient digital infrastructure in Scotland. Our investments in recent years, together with our further digital connectivity plans, is providing future-proofed, resilient connectivity for decades to come.

The Scottish Government's Digital Connectivity Division works closely with Highland & Islands Enterprise colleagues as well as the local authorities across the Highlands and Islands area. We are currently delivering on several programmes aimed at developing Scotland's digital connectivity with a key focus on rural and island areas. Some further information is provided below.

Reaching 100% (R100) contracts

Through the Scottish Government's Reaching 100% (R100) contracts, we are investing over £600 million to extend fast, reliable broadband to homes and businesses across Scotland. This is one of the most ambitious and complex digital infrastructure programmes in Europe.

As of 11 November 2024, over 65,000 premises now have access to faster broadband thanks to the Scottish Government's R100 contracts, delivered by Openreach. Over 80% of the premises to be connected through the R100 contracts are in rural areas, reflecting our view that investment should be focussed where it is needed most – rural Scotland.

We have invested three times more in the R100 North contract, which includes the Highlands and Islands, than we have in the Central or South contracts. As of 11 November 2024, over 19,000 premises now have access to faster broadband connections thanks to the R100 North contract alone. All of the R100 North contract

build will be future-proofed, fibre-to-the-premises (FTTP) – more than 30 times faster than our superfast commitment.

In 2022 the R100 North contract delivered 16 new fibre optic subsea cables to 15 Scottish islands, which will enable over 12,000 island premises to be connected to full fibre broadband.

R100 Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (R100 SBVS)

The Reaching 100% Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (R100 SBVS) was designed to ensure that anyone who could not access a superfast broadband connection – either through R100 contract build or commercial coverage – would be able to do so. Through the combination of the subsidy of up to £5,000 (to cover capital costs associated with equipment and installation) and the affordability threshold of £56.20 per month (guaranteed for 12 months), we believe that the scheme offers an affordable and accessible means for eligible properties to secure a connection.

With around 40 registered suppliers, there is a good mix of technology available, including fixed wireless, 4G mobile, satellite and fibre services. Indeed, of those connections delivered to date across Scotland, almost a quarter utilise fibre-to-the-premises (FTTP) technology.

As of 18 November 2024, 1,498 connections have been delivered in the Highlands and Islands through use of vouchers, with a further 382 potential connections in the pipeline.

Scottish 4G Infill (S4GI) and the Shared Rural Network (SRN) programmes

The Scottish Government has now completed delivery of its Scottish 4G Infill programme (S4GI), in which we have invested £28.75 million (including £11.27 million of ERDF funding for the Highlands & Islands) to bring future-proofed 4G mobile infrastructure and services at 55 mobile "notspots" – again providing connectivity in rural and island areas.

All 55 masts are now live and providing 4G services with 37 of the 55 masts located in the Highlands & Islands. Around half of S4GI masts offer a service by at least 3 different mobile network operators and S4GI delivery partners WHP Telecoms Ltd. and Cellnex UK continue to work to bring more mobile network operators onto S4GI sites, further increasing choice for customers.

S4GI is improving everyday life for the communities and local businesses our masts serve. Mobile connectivity is directly supporting wider plans for local tourism and enabling residents to access services and stay in touch with families and friends as well as helping rural businesses. In an independent evaluation into the impact of S4GI, residents and business owners highlighted a range of benefits since the programme's completion. This includes wider online customer bases for businesses and better connectivity for communities during broadband outages.

The Scottish Government welcomes the £1 billion joint commitment from the UK Government and the mobile network operators in the Shared Rural Network (SRN) programme and is supportive of its rollout throughout Scotland.

We are aware that there is some opposition to planned SRN rollout from organisations concerned about the adverse effects in wilderness areas. We are working closely with the UKG's SRN programme team to broker dialogue and forge a solution, with a review of planned Scottish sites being undertaken which we hope will address concerns while still delivering the coverage uplift needed.

Project Gigabit in Scotland

The Scottish Government is playing a key role in delivering the UK Government's Project Gigabit programme in Scotland. This programme aims at achieving 85% gigabit-capable coverage across the UK by 2025 and nationwide coverage by 2030.

We are leading delivery of local and regional procurement activity in Scotland and jointly managing activity in Scotland that arises from a nationwide contract recently awarded by the UK Government.

The Scottish Government has worked with Building Digital UK (BDUK) to prepare a regional procurement covering over 13,500 eligible premises in Orkney and Shetland. This procurement launched on 11 December 2024 with up to £40.7 million of public subsidy made available to an infrastructure supplier to deliver gigabit-capable connectivity to premises across the Orkney and Shetland islands, including to some of the hardest to reach communities in Scotland.

Premises in other parts of the North of Scotland are expected to be included in a contract with Openreach, who will be delivering via Project Gigabit across the UK.

A call-off on this contract, covering over 76,000 premises in Scotland not included in other contracts, is expected to be initiated in the coming months. This call-off is anticipated to make up to £157.1 million available to connect premises across Scotland.

The Scottish Government and UK Government will work together to ensure that this activity and our own R100 programme are aligned – allowing Openreach to drive coverage even further into Scotland's rural and island communities, including in the Highlands and Islands.

Petitioner written submission, 3 February 2025

PE2127/B: Develop a new Digital Connectivity Plan for the Highlands and Islands

The Scottish Government's submission of 20 December 2024 attempts to paint a picture of progress in digital connectivity across Scotland, yet the reality for many communities—particularly in the Highlands and Islands—is starkly different. While it is acknowledged that telecommunications is a reserved matter, the Scottish Government has repeatedly claimed leadership in digital infrastructure, yet its

actions fall short of addressing the fundamental issues of digital exclusion, inequality, and slow delivery in rural Scotland.

The Ofcom Connected Nations Scotland 2024 report states "Scotland remains, by many metrics, the least connected of the UK's four nations."

We have the highest rate of 4G 'not spots' in the UK. The lowest full fibre access in the UK. The lowest rural residential superfast broadband coverage in the UK.

It's clear that many of these issues, whilst Scotland-wide, are much more acutely felt by communities in the Highlands and Islands and that's why this petition is asking for the Scottish Government to provide a dedicated, new digital connectivity strategy for the region.

Failure to Deliver on R100 Commitments

The Scottish Government's flagship Reaching 100% (R100) programme has faced persistent delays and underwhelming results. Despite promises to connect every home and business by 2021, thousands of premises in rural Scotland remain without access to reliable broadband. The Government's own data confirms that only 19,000 premises in the Highlands and Islands have been connected under the R100 North contract—far short of what is required.

The reliance on Openreach has proven inadequate, as evidenced by Ofcom's 2024 report highlighting Scotland's status as the least connected nation in the UK. It is clear that Scottish Government backed infrastructure rollouts must be accelerated, and we need to explore more diverse and competitive providers to drive meaningful progress.

Digital Exclusion Remains a Crisis

The Scottish Government claims that geography should not be a barrier to digital access, yet data from the Scottish Household Survey shows a clear digital divide. In the most deprived areas, 13.4% of households still lack internet access, compared to just 3.7% in the least deprived areas. The failure to provide universal, affordable broadband is leaving too many communities behind, exacerbating social and economic inequalities.

Lack of Transparency on Project Gigabit in Scotland

While the Scottish Government states it is 'playing a key role' in delivering the UK Government's Project Gigabit, the details remain vague. The timeline for procurement in the Highlands and Islands is unclear, and there is little evidence that Scottish Ministers are ensuring the alignment of R100 with UK-wide efforts.

A new digital connectivity plan from the Scottish Government would ensure improved transparency on Project Gigabit rollouts in Scotland and the Scottish Government's involvement, ensuring funding is targeted effectively to the hardest-to-reach areas.

Mobile Coverage and the Failure of S4GI

The Scottish Government claims success with the Scottish 4G Infill (S4GI) programme, yet its own figures show that only 55 sites were delivered—an insufficient response to widespread mobile not-spots. Ofcom's report highlights Scotland's weak rural 4G coverage, further proving the Scottish Government's failure to prioritise mobile connectivity.

While the Scottish Government supports the UK Government's Shared Rural Network (SRN), there is little evidence of meaningful engagement to expedite its delivery in Scotland. A new Digital Connectivity Plan for the Highlands and Islands should also include a clear strategy to eliminate mobile not-spots and expand 5G coverage across rural areas.

A Vision for a better digitally Connected Highlands and Islands

The Scottish Government needs to tackle the digital divide head-on and should, as part of a new plan focus on:

- **Accelerating broadband rollout** by holding providers accountable for missed targets.

- **Expanding full-fibre coverage** to ensure all rural and island communities have reliable connections.

- **Tackling affordability issues** by addressing cost barriers for low-income households.

- **Enhancing mobile infrastructure** to eliminate not-spots and boost coverage in remote areas.

The Scottish Government's failure to deliver on digital connectivity is holding Scotland back. A new plan is needed to ensure that every community—regardless of geography or income—is part of the digital future.

Rhoda Grant MSP written submission, 4 February 2025

PE2127/C: Develop a new Digital Connectivity Plan for the Highlands and Islands

This petition rightly calls on the Scottish Government to develop a comprehensive Digital Connectivity Plan for the Highlands and Islands that addresses the challenges and ensures equal opportunities for all, and I support this petition. This issue needs to be addressed and the more proactively this can be done, the more likely it can be successful. The petition would require the Scottish Government to create a plan on how to tackle the current inequality of digital connectivity the Highlands and Islands faces.

Reliable digital connectivity is now a necessity of life. Across all areas, there is an increasing reliance on online services to deliver basic facilities. So many aspects of business, healthcare, education, retail, and others can only fully function with good, reliable, and effective online connection.

The direction of travel towards online reliance is one-way, and will not slow down. With that, we become more and more reliant on good digital connectivity.

Innovation and development are leading us towards more devices connected to the internet, from smart home appliances, healthcare devices, to industrial sensors, which rely on fast and stable internet connections to function effectively.

The ongoing work to prepare Scotland to utilise and embrace new technologies reflects the importance of having good internet.

Yet, there is a digital divide in Scotland when we look at rural areas. Across the Highlands and Islands, many communities face slow broadband speeds, unreliable mobile coverage, and a growing digital divide when compared to urban areas. Some of the statistics that underpin this petition highlight the need for action. From the most recent Rural Scotland Data Dashboard, coverage from superfast or newer higher-speed services is consistently lower (superfast broadband coverage is 79% in rural areas compared to 99% in urban areas and gigabit-capable coverage is only 34% in rural areas compared to 80% in urban areas in 2023). Ofcom estimate that 18,000 premises in Scotland (residential and commercial) still do not have access to a 'decent' broadband service with speeds above 10mb/s via either a fixed or wireless network.

Good connectivity is inherently linked to attracting workers and families into the area and stemming depopulation. There is a domino effect to poor connectivity that poses and existential threat to the competitiveness to the Highlands and Islands.

We must be proactive to ensure that the region does not fall to further digital disadvantage, and a Digital Connectivity Plan would kick start a set of credible and practical actions for meaningful intervention.