

Commons Select Committee – Terms of Reference 27 July 2015

Inquiry into establishing world-class connectivity throughout the UK announced

A key function of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport is to manage the delivery of the superfast broadband programme and improve digital connectivity. It is widely acknowledged that proper digital connectivity plays an essential role in people's family, social and business lives, and in their access to public services.

The Government aims to ensure that superfast broadband is available to 95% of UK premises by the end of 2017. Earlier this year the National Audit Office reported that the Government's programme was on track to meet the revised targets, with superfast broadband likely to reach 90% coverage of premises ahead of December 2016.

The Government has also intervened to improve coverage of mobile networks and Ofcom, the communications regulator, has attached coverage obligations to mobile network operators' licences. Under an agreement last year all four of the main mobile network operators agreed to a £5 billion investment programme to improve mobile infrastructure by 2017.

Extending broadband coverage

The challenge now is extending broadband coverage, including to the hardest-to-reach rural areas and pockets of poor connectivity in inner cities. The remaining 5% (approximately 1.5 million of premises) is dispersed across 70% of the UK's landmass. Approximately 1% (i.e. 20% of the final 5%) is in urban areas. Problems of connectivity and lack of access are frequently made worse by poor mobile services in the affected areas.

There is marked concern both in Parliament and among the general public that many individuals, households and businesses in these areas may never have access to adequate broadband and mobile services, and that is already having a serious impact on them and the communities around them.

Inquiry into coverage, delivery and performance of superfast broadband

In that context, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee launches an inquiry into the coverage, delivery and performance of superfast broadband in the UK, and into progress being made in extending and improving mobile coverage and services. During the course of the inquiry the Committee may also hold regional hearings to learn what challenges exist in different parts of the UK.

The Committee invites written evidence in response to the following questions:

- What role should Government, Ofcom and industry play in extending superfast broadband to hard-to-reach premises?
- Is there sufficient competition in these markets? If not, how can any market failures best be addressed given the investments already made?
- What are the commercial, financial and technical challenges the programme faces in reaching the final 5%? What technologies exist to overcome them? What investment is required, by whom and for what return?
- Given that in practice a Universal Service Obligation could not capture 100% of households, what should a USO for broadband look like?
- What are other countries doing to reach 'not-spots'? How affordable are their solutions?
- Should Government be investing more in research and development into finding innovative solutions to meet the communication needs of remote communities?
- Are BT and other communication companies investing sufficiently themselves in reaching these groups?
- What investment and progress are the mobile network operators making in improving mobile coverage across the UK and enabling a swifter process when users choose to change provider? How could these best be improved?
- How have the existing Government broadband programmes been delivered?

Respondents may of course wish to comment on other aspects relevant to these issues.

Chair's comments

"Proper digital connectivity is key both to the well-being of many communities and to Britain's economic future. Yet many people and businesses are unable to receive the digital access and services they need. This inquiry is designed to find out exactly why that is, and how to fix it."

The status of the inquiry is open. There are as yet no public meeting scheduled.