

Scottish Government submission of 31 March 2022

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

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the aforementioned petition. The Committee has asked the Scottish Government for its views on the action called for in the petition, which is:

“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.”

The Scottish Government recognises the ever-increasing importance of good quality digital connectivity in all aspects of our lives, particularly in Scotland’s more remote and rural areas, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have only served to reinforce that. This is why, despite the reserved nature of telecommunications legislation, we made our commitment to extend superfast broadband access to 100% of premises in Scotland, regardless of remoteness or rurality.

We chose to exclude urban properties from the procurement for the R100 contracts, reflecting our view that public investment should be made where it is most needed – in rural Scotland. Given the critical importance of delivering a network that has genuine geographic reach across all of Scotland, we also took the decision to mandate infrastructure deployment in key remote rural locations.

We have always known that ongoing commercial build and the R100 contracts alone would not provide superfast broadband for everyone. This is why we developed the R100 Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (SBVS) to ensure that everyone had the ability to access a superfast broadband service.

It is important to note that the R100 contracts and the R100 SBVS can only target properties currently capable of accessing sub-superfast speed (less than 30 Megabits per second (Mbps)).

The Scottish Government recognises the desire of owners and tenants to secure a connection at their property with their preferred supplier and technology. However, the purpose of a SBVS voucher is to allow those who are eligible to secure a superfast connection of 30Mbps. There are a number of suppliers offering alternative technology services - including 4G, satellite and fixed wireless - that will achieve that.

In determining the technical requirements associated with the SBVS, we have carefully considered the affordability threshold. As a result, the terms and conditions for the SBVS define an affordable service as one that will cost the customer no more than £46.10 per month. This is the same monthly cost as services delivered through the UK Government's Universal Service Obligation (USO). We considered it appropriate to adopt this criteria, given the extensive consultation, robust analysis and monitoring that Ofcom (the UK's telecoms regulator) undertook to support their decision. Ofcom has also committed to reviewing pricing regularly. It should also be noted that the USO only guarantees a 10 Mbps service.

I trust that this information proves useful to the Committee.