

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 21 January 2026
2nd Meeting, 2026 (Session 6)

PE2199: Facilitate access to emergency telephone services for remote communities

Introduction

Petitioner Timothy Bowles

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide robust backup or alternative means to ensure that remote communities are able to contact emergency services in the event of complete power failure.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2199>

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 30 October 2025.
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, 386 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 received submissions from Consumer Scotland and the Scottish Government, which are set out in **Annexe C** of this paper.

Action

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

Clerks to the Committee
January 2026

Annexe A: Summary of petition

PE2199: Facilitate access to emergency telephone services for remote communities

Petitioner

Timothy Bowles

Date Lodged

30 October 2025

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide robust backup or alternative means to ensure that remote communities are able to contact emergency services in the event of complete power failure.

Background information

On the Isle of Seil we have been forced to change our phones to VOIP. In the event of power failure this will not work. BT/EE insist that a battery backup for the router, and alternative 4G service are adequate to cope with this eventuality. However, on Seil both the telephone exchange and the only available 4G mast use the same electricity supply and do not have adequate backup. As our telephone boxes have also been removed, in the recent power cuts residents have had no telephone, no internet, no mobile phone and thus no means whatsoever to contact emergency services. It is certain that we are not the only community in this position. A robust backup service must be made available to everyone to permit speedy connection with emergency services. Otherwise it is inevitable that people will die for lack of connectivity.

Annexe B: SPICe briefing on PE2199

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

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

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Annexe C: Written submissions

Consumer Scotland written submission, 26 November 2025

PE2199/A: Facilitate access to emergency telephone services for remote communities

Consumer Scotland is the statutory body for consumers in Scotland. Established by the Consumer Scotland Act 2020, we are accountable to the Scottish Parliament. We work to ensure that consumer interests are at the heart of a fair, transparent and sustainable Scottish marketplace.

I am writing to you regarding *PE2199: Facilitate access to emergency telephone services for remote communities*. This is an issue on which Consumer Scotland has conducted relevant work and I am writing to provide the Committee with further information about this.

The current UK traditional landline telephone network is reaching the end of its life and needs to be upgraded. By January 2027, the majority of consumers will have been migrated to Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology which allows users to make telephone calls over a broadband internet connection instead of a traditional telephone line.

For most customers, switching to VoIP should be straightforward and they will continue to receive what they recognise as a traditional phone service. However, VoIP landlines will not work in a power cut without additional backup systems being put in place. This in turn affects the operation of any devices linked to landlines such as telecare alarms.

Consumer Scotland has been engaged in research and advocacy on this issue since 2023, driven by our concerns about the impact the migration may have on consumers in Scotland. Specifically, we have concerns that:

- the migration may disproportionately impact some consumers in Scotland, particularly those in remote and rural areas,
- consumers were not fully aware of the change and its impact
- further measures were needed to mitigate risks.

In December 2023 we published our report, based on analysis of data produced by Ofcom's Communications Consumer Panel. Our [report](#) found that consumers in remote and rural areas of Scotland face disproportionate impacts from the migration as a result of poorer than average mobile signal and more frequent and longer lasting power cuts. We highlighted that taken together, these factors affected the likely ability of consumers in Scotland to make calls in the event of a power cut.

Our report made recommendations to telecommunications providers, Ofcom and the UK and Scottish governments on how these risks to consumers in Scotland could be reduced. This included recommending additional measures to protect consumers in

vulnerable circumstances and improving public awareness through a consumer communications campaign.

Following on from the publication of our report, we have engaged directly with BT, Openreach and Virgin Media O2 to monitor progress with the migration and provided them with advice to ensure that their migration process did not disproportionately disadvantage consumers in Scotland. We have also raised concerns with Ofcom that the current thresholds for reporting outages, based on number of premises without service, may not sufficiently capture the impact of outages on remote and rural areas of Scotland, where population levels may not be high enough to meet the threshold. Ofcom has subsequently noted an intention to introduce a further threshold, based on the duration of outages, which we welcome.

In March 2024 we wrote to the UK and Scottish governments outlining our concerns and advocating for improved communications and resilience for consumers in remote and rural Scotland. In December 2024 we again wrote to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) Minister highlighting the risks to some consumers. These letters and the responses received can all be found on our [website here](#).

We are pleased that some progress has been made in response to our concerns. The UK Government has worked with providers and stakeholders to produce a [Telecare National Action Plan](#) and awareness raising plan. A set of safeguards to protect vulnerable customers was also developed as part of a new non-voluntary migrations checklist. This checklist identified a number of risk factors arising from our research, including landline reliance or the lack of a reliable mobile signal. We are aware that work is also continuing by providers to develop improved backup or interim solutions for consumers at greater risk.

We continue to engage with Ofcom, DSIT, the Communications Consumer Panel and individual communications providers to monitor progress and to identify risks to consumers and ways to mitigate these, for example by improved backup solutions, or better communication. We are also engaging with the Scottish Government and local authority stakeholders to encourage improved data sharing which may enable providers to more easily identify consumers who need support. We are also working with stakeholders such as Trading Standards Scotland to ensure that potential for scams to occur during the migration process is identified and risks mitigated where possible.

We would be happy to engage with Committee to provide further detail about our work in this area. As the deadline for migration of January 2027 approaches, it is essential that consumers are well informed about what the migration will mean for them, and that stakeholders are clear about what needs to be done to ensure that consumers are protected.

Scottish Government written submission, 1 December 2025

PE2199/B: Facilitate access to emergency telephone services for remote communities

Does the Scottish Government consider the specific ask[s] of the petition to be practical or achievable? If not, please explain why.

Telecommunications policy remains Reserved to the UK Government and is regulated by Ofcom. In practice this means that the Scottish Government is unable to directly intervene or instruct providers such as BT in cases like this.

The best resource to refer to is Ofcom's [consumer-facing webpage on the PSTN switch-off](#).

There is also further information at a network level in Ofcom's [Connected Nations 2025 UK report](#).

What, if any, action is the Scottish Government currently taking to address the issues raised by this petition, and is any further action being considered that will achieve the ask[s] of this petition?

A new draft National Islands Plan is to be laid before the Scottish Parliament before the Christmas Recess. A statutory document under the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, the Plan recognises that island infrastructure and connectivity can be vulnerable, with disruption heightening issues concerning equity of access for island communities and requiring rapid responses in often challenging conditions. While reflecting on the robust resilience arrangements already in place across Scotland, the Plan recognises that more can be done to strengthen them further and make them even more cognisant of island communities' circumstances. To this end, the draft Plan includes a commitment to working with local authorities and other key stakeholders to capture and apply learning from disruption affecting island communities, helping to strengthen preparedness and response planning, including in relation to digital infrastructure and food resilience.

It should be noted that the switch-off of the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) in the UK is industry-led, with oversight from the UK Government's Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), reflecting that telecoms legislation is reserved to UK government.

The Scottish Government has utilised available levers and invested heavily in recent years to improve connectivity in communities across Scotland. Over the last decade, Scottish public sector-led digital infrastructure programmes have enabled over one million faster broadband connections. Through the over £600 million Reaching 100% (R100) programme we have accelerated access to future-proofed full fibre broadband to some of the most challenging terrain in Europe, and will continue to do so in the coming years.

Around 80% of 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. The vast majority of R100 contract build is full-fibre and Gigabit-capable – over 30 times faster than our original superfast commitment. We currently expect the contracts to connect around 113,000 premises and complete in 2028. The R100 North contract has delivered 16 new fibre subsea cables, further bolstering connectivity across 15 Scottish islands.

The Scottish Government is also playing a lead role in the delivery of Project Gigabit in Scotland. The first Project Gigabit contract in Scotland was awarded by the Scottish Government in January 2025 to Scottish alternative network provider GoFibre, with 13,000 premises expected to be connected in the Borders and East Lothian using £26 million of UK Government funding. A further procurement covering over 63,000 eligible premises in the North East of Scotland was awarded to GoFibre in July 2025, with £105M of UKG funding. There is a live procurement covering Orkney and Shetland currently underway, with a further regional procurement in Fife, Perth and Kinross expected to launch before the end of this year.

The Scottish Government also recognises the important part that mobile connectivity plays in keeping communities connected – through our award-winning Scotland 4G Infill programme, we have invested £28.75 million to deliver future-proofed, 4G mobile infrastructure and services at 55 mobile “notspots” in rural and island areas. Furthermore, the UK Government’s Shared Rural Network programme is expected to increase geographic coverage of 4G to over 91% by 2027.

Is there any further information the Scottish Government wish to bring to the Committee's attention, which would assist it in considering this petition?

The relevant areas of competence have already taken a number of steps to ensure emergency back-up systems are in place. On the 18 December 2023, a number of Communications providers, including BT, Virgin Media O2, Sky and Vodafone signed a Public Switched Telephone Network charter which sets out steps that the industry will take to protect vulnerable consumers through the transition. Further information regarding the Charter can be found here: [Public Switched Telephone Network charter - GOV.UK](#).

Ofcom, the independent telecoms regulator, has issued [guidance on how telecoms companies can fulfil their regulatory obligation](#) to ensure that their Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) customers have access to the emergency services in such circumstances. This guidance states that providers should have at least one solution available that enables access to emergency organisations for a minimum of one hour in the event of a power outage in the premises. The solution should be suitable for the needs of the customer and should be offered free of charge to those who are vulnerable and are dependent on their landline telephone.

Critical National Infrastructure Team

Civil Contingencies Division