

# Submission

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**To:** Scottish Affairs Committee

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## Connectivity In Scotland: Digital Connectivity

NFU Scotland (NFUS) is the leading agricultural organisation in Scotland. Representing more than 9,000 farmers, growers, and crofters, our members provide and support thousands of jobs and deliver significant economic, social and environmental benefits across Scotland.

Agriculture is the lynchpin of rural Scotland and is an important part of Scotland's booming food and drink industry. Scottish agriculture generates a gross output of £3.3 billion annually. The farming and crofting sector is committed to sustainable food production, enhancing biodiversity and helping to tackle climate change.

### 1) What are the main barriers to delivering full-fibre and gigabit-capable broadband in Scotland's rural and island communities?

- How effective has the rollout of *Project Gigabit* been in Scotland?
- To what extent are UK Government initiatives coordinated with the Scottish Government's *R100* programme?
- What lessons can be learned from previous broadband rollout schemes, such as superfast broadband?
- To deliver on producing high-quality, local food, and central to our food and drink sector, farmers need the right tools. Reliable broadband and mobile coverage are not optional – they are essential for running efficient, productive farming businesses and ensuring safety in some of the most isolated parts of the country.

- Our members feel left behind in the digital era and the roll out of these projects has not kept pace with their needs or the wider world. They continue to face barriers to improved mobile and internet connections, and connection is often not fit for the purpose of running a business in this day and age. This acts as an obstacle to innovation, limits their business functionality and hinders their ability to diversity.
- Our members feel there has been a lack of coordination and join-up between the UK Government and Scottish Government to roll out these projects. It is crucial that both the UK and Scottish Government work together to collectively understand the issues facing people living and working in rural Scotland and meet the needs of our most remote and rural communities and businesses. Regular engagement at both Ministerial and official level between the UK and the Scottish Government is essential.

## 2) What is the future outlook for 5G deployment in rural Scotland, and what lessons can be taken from the 4G rollout?

- What impact has the Electronic Communications Code had on mast hosting agreements and mobile infrastructure deployment in Scotland?
- What are the implications of landowner resistance or withdrawal from hosting mobile infrastructure in Scotland?
- We opposed the implementation of, and continue to oppose, the Electronic Communications Code. The Code is draconian and is significantly skewed in the favour of operators. The main impacts have been:
  - Rents have been slashed, with some of our members reporting reductions of up to 80 Per Cent of previous rents. This reduction has left farmers feeling frustrated because they are providing the same service with much less income.
  - Operators have the right to share with other providers-this leaves our members in a difficult position because they can have a company on their land with whom they have no legal agreement.
  - Operators have the right to refer to an Upper Tier Tribunal-this is being used as a negotiating tactic to force farmers to agree.
- Whilst it is difficult to do so, we predict that some landowners may walk away from hosting masts at all. And finding sites for new masts to support rollout of 5G and 6G will be extremely difficult. We believe that this is likely to lead to an increasing problem with 'not spots'.

- Owner occupier farmers who entered into mast agreements many years ago and in good faith now find that they are being put in a difficult position by the telecommunications companies with offers of punitive rents or threatened with land court action at significant expense to the landowner. This approach seems to be supported by SG policies and is unjust particularly when the communications companies are making substantial profits.

**3) What are the knock-on impacts to transitioning to digital services for those in Scotland's rural communities. This could include but is not limited to: the phase-out of Radio Teleswitch Service (RTS), the move away from analogue landlines and moving towards an online-only television service.**

- **What support is there for affected households, and is it sufficient?**

- NFUS members are incredibly concerned with the lack of resilience in the network. When there is a fault in the network, the resulting effects are significant and costly, and also without a clear date for resolution.
- This was seen earlier this year in Shetland, when the interconnector cable connecting the Northern Isles to the mainland was damaged. This caused a significant amount of people to be left without any form of communication for over 5 weeks. This has very real and costly impacts for businesses, and there are wider concerns for health and safety for people in remote areas. It leaves many members feeling vulnerable and at risk.
- Our members, particularly those in the islands and most remote areas, feel there has been a severe lack of support and consideration for them.
- Further, often these new options do not work in rural parts of Scotland. For example, replacement smart electricity meters often do not work and so "heritage" electricity meters have to be installed instead.
- There is also concern that this more will alienate our older generations, who do not feel sufficiently "tech-savvy" to adapt to these changes.

**4) What role could satellite technologies, or other alternative solutions play in improving connectivity in Scotland's remote areas?**

- **What are the barriers to adoption of these technologies and how might they be overcome?**

- Our members feel that satellite could be part of the solution, but they would like to see a more resilient network planned out thoroughly, where full fibre is preferable.
- We also have concerns over the cost of satellite options. While satellite may be part of the solution, how expensive it is currently is prohibitive to many of our members.

- NFUS members consider there to have been a lack of joined up thinking, where there has been no overarching strategy in how this has been rolled out resulting in unreliable, patchy and vulnerable coverage.

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