

## Fast Tracking Rural Digital Connectivity

### Why is fast-track rural digital connectivity crucial to agricultural productivity?

Reliable mobile coverage and gigabit-capable broadband access underpins the drive for agricultural productivity growth by enabling use of new technology and improved business practices.

- Access and operation of new technology and tools such as automatic data collection and sharing, mapping, precision farming, robotics and automation.
- Improved business management, planning, market access, and delivery of farming operations.
- Driving environmental performance through data driven resource use efficiency and engagement in government productivity schemes delivered through online platforms.
- Business efficiency with access to professional services including banking, accountancy, legal, advisory, suppliers, assurance schemes, government and public services such as grant schemes and planning system.
- Access to remote training, learning and working to drive innovation and change.



*Digital connectivity is also essential for the wider rural economy and diversified farm enterprises such as farm shops, tourism and for public health and well-being when visiting.*

### What is currently not working?

- The Shared Rural Network for mobile connectivity is a significant step forward but there needs to be greater clarity and transparency that the target of 100% coverage by 2025 can be met.

- The revised gigabit capable broadband targets of 100% of the UK by 2030 will mean that significant rural areas will be waiting a further 5 years than the original deadline of 2025 set by the 2017 Conservative Manifesto
- Government grants for upgrading broadband connections need to be large enough to cover the high installation costs in low density rural housing areas, such as farms. If not, there will remain a divide between those who can access high speed digital connectivity and those who are disadvantaged.
- There are insufficient digital skills programmes to exploit the known advantages of digital connectivity. Until this is addressed, even with the wider deployment of gigabit capable networks, many will not be in a position to use this technology.

## **Recommendations – fast tracking rural mobile and broadband connectivity**

- The Shared Rural Network for rural mobile connectivity must set out a clear plan on how it will meet its legal coverage obligations as set out by Ofcom.
- The Government must clearly set out a strategic timeline for gigabit-capable broadband with equal deployments in rural areas and fair costs for rural business connections.
- All government grants for installing gigabit-capable broadband including the Universal Service Obligation (USO), should be technology-neutral and allow rural specific solutions in addition to the full fibre network
- There must be a government co-ordinated programme of digital skills development through a range of routes for all skills levels that can be appropriate for farming and diversified rural businesses.

## **What does good look like?**

The goal must be for universal connectivity where every farm has access to a reliable and effective fixed line and mobile connection for the current and future needs of their business, in addition to the necessary skills to take advantage of digital connectivity to increase both on-farm productivity and wider business benefits.

## **What happens if nothing changes?**

The ability to use the full range of digital services will undoubtedly improve the economic viability of many farmers. But it is incumbent on Government to ensure that the measures that are currently being deployed are achieved on time. If not, agricultural productivity will be adversely affected to the detriment of both the agricultural as well as the wider rural economy.

Farms and rural communities will be left behind economically and socially if access to digital services does not improve. Agricultural productivity will be limited and potentially leave British agriculture less capable of competing with imports from countries with access to better digital services and technology.

## Key terms and definitions

	Term	Definition
Mobile connectivity	Mobile Connectivity	Mobile connectivity is the provision of a signal through a mast network normally to a user's mobile phone. It can be used for telephone, text and internet access.
	Shared Rural Network (SRN)	The SRN is a solution to "not-spots" where mobile phone providers do not have signal due to lack of infrastructure. The four major providers (O2, Three, EE, and Vodafone) share masts and all put their own equipment on them so all the providers will have equal coverage.
	4G and 5G signal	These refer to the speed of mobile internet access, with each new generation offering increased speeds. 4G is now standard around 100 Mbps, but 5G is now being introduced which is around 20x faster. 5G is not widely available yet. It also requires more mast infrastructure than 4G as it works at a higher frequency and does not travel as far as 4G waves.
Broadband internet connectivity	Gigabit-capable broadband	Gigabit-capable broadband is a measure of the internet connection speed measured in gigabits per second (Gbps) and supersedes 'superfast' broadband measured in megabits. It can have any delivery method including cable (full fibre), mobile or wireless fixed-point access.
	Universal Service Obligation (USO)	The USO is a government program aimed at delivering broadband to anyone with less than 10 Mbps and will provide up to £3,400 per premises to get gigabit capable broadband

