

KEVIN HOLLINRAKE MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Rt Hon Jeremy Wright MP
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport
Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
4th Floor, 100 Parliament Street
London SW1A 2BQ

3 July 2019

Dear Jeremy,
Shared Rural Network

In our letter to you on 29th March, we expressed our concern that many rural areas are covered by some, but not all, of the UK's mobile networks.

However, since that letter, we now understand that all four Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) have brought forward a proposal to Government for a 'Shared Rural Network' to help extend coverage to the hardest to reach areas, including those in our constituencies, which stretch across the entire UK.

Poor mobile coverage has long hampered and held back rural communities. Therefore, we welcome the proposal brought forward by the mobile industry, which could deliver greater coverage than that planned by Ofcom via their upcoming spectrum auction and, importantly, delivers extended coverage from all four operators, as opposed to only two.

While we've previously written to you in support of roaming, we see industry's proposal for a shared rural network as potentially another effective way of extending mobile coverage and believe it should replace Ofcom's coverage proposals because, in part, it has the support of all four MNOs. We also see the ask of £620m from the Government to build these masts as better value for taxpayers' money, when you take into consideration the potential £800m discount Ofcom had planned to offer just two operators at the next auction and would instead urge Government to invest that discount in improving coverage.

We understand the importance of protecting the British countryside, but we also understand there must be a balance that takes into account the necessity for mobile companies to build and install their infrastructure. Therefore, we are also sympathetic to the industry's proposals for reform that includes the reform of Permitted Development Rights to allow for taller masts, equivalence in policy with fixed broadband, such as business rates relief, similar to those for new fixed fibre networks, and finally better access to public sector sites and land.

As a group of MPs representing parts of the country where ensuring adequate digital connectivity for all is a major priority, we urge you to seriously consider the industry's proposal as an alternative to rural roaming. Not only will it help deliver the connectivity needed to stimulate growth and deliver improvements in economic, educational and leisure opportunity for rural areas across the UK, but also do so in a more efficient, more effective and a less environmentally impactful way than current proposals.

Yours ever,

Kevin Hollinrake MP



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