

# Levelling up broadband connectivity

## The **Action** Project

October 2021



## Briefing Paper: Levelling up broadband connectivity

The Action Project, October 2021

### Background to the Action Project

The David Hume Institute's Action Project brought people together from across Scotland to consider the actions required to move faster towards a more prosperous, sustainable, inclusive and fair country.

Over 5,000 people from across Scotland told us their actions to help Scotland build forward better. Across our research conversations there were multiple calls for a renewed focus on levelling up Scotland's broadband connectivity as some communities are still struggling with basic broadband connection.

### The Action

**The UK and Scottish Governments should work together with commercial partners to accelerate superfast broadband provision, in order to deliver reliable, high speed broadband connectivity across Scotland.**

### The Issue

Internet connectivity has become essential for modern life and business is virtually impossible without it. It is essential for Scotland's productivity, regional equality and climate change that areas without provision get reliable high speed broadband access quickly.

Research conversations as part of the Action Project with business owners, educators and young people living and working in rural areas, revealed the urgent need to shift focus on infrastructure to prioritise broadband rollout.

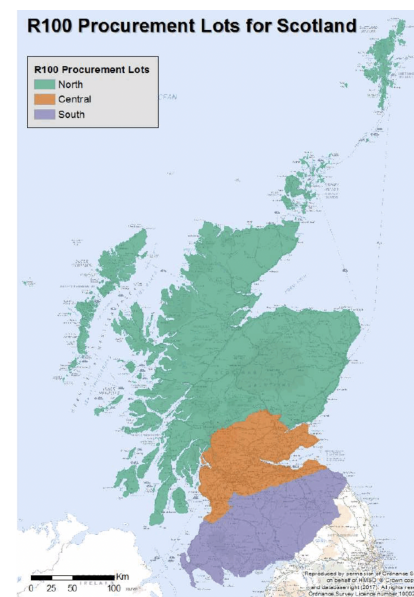
*"It's all very well saying come [to rural Scotland] and work online – or start an online business – but I'm working from home, and even with every other device in the house off, I can't even use my camera if I want sound because my internet is so ridiculously slow. I've tried every avenue to get faster access. It's nearly impossible to work."*

*(Community conversation participant)*

The UK Government has stated its intention to deliver infrastructure that improves everyday life across the UK including the new Project Gigabit, which will prioritise areas that currently have slow connections and which would otherwise have been left behind in broadband companies' rollout plans.

The Scottish Government's Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband Programme (DSSB) means almost 95% of premises across Scotland are now able to access superfast broadband (30Mbps+) – up from just 59% in 2014.<sup>1</sup> The Reaching 100% (R100) programme focuses on the final 5% who don't have access to 30Mbps+ or have any future upgrade plans. The aim was to make superfast broadband available to all premises in Scotland by 2021, with additional financial support in place from the Scottish Government through a voucher scheme for those that will not be reached by commercial operators.

Legal challenges delayed the contract and rollout plan for the North of Scotland (LOT 1) and so the indicative completion date from BT is now 2026.<sup>2</sup> With the pace of technological change accelerated by Covid, waiting another 5 years for reliable connection could lead to depopulation of areas affected.



Source: Scottish Government, 2019

The UK Government pledged in 2017 for everyone to have access to 10Mbps<sup>3</sup> and it can now be raised with Ofcom if your speed is below this threshold.<sup>4</sup> According to Uswitch the slowest street in Scotland is still faster than many in other parts of the UK.<sup>5</sup> However, with travel distances to critical services much longer for remote areas of Scotland, high speed broadband is often an essential lifeline.

Many of the rural areas that continue to face the greatest challenges in broadband connection are not priorities for UK Government Levelling Up.<sup>6</sup> Previously European funds like LEADER were used by some communities to increase broadband access (see Balquidder case study). Unlike physical infrastructure connections which were factored in for England in the Levelling Up fund criteria, broadband connection was not a criteria considered.

<sup>1</sup> Scotland Superfast, 2021. [About the programmes](#). Online. Accessed 11 October 2021.

<sup>2</sup> ISPreview, 2021. [Scotland update of r100 progress and broadband voucher delays](#). Online. Accessed 11 October 2021

<sup>3</sup> UK Government, 2017. [High speed broadband to become a legal right](#). [Online press release] Accessed 11th October 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Ofcom, 2021. [Your right to request a decent broadband service: What you need to know](#). Online. Accessed 11th October 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Uswitch, 2020. [The UK streets with the slowest broadband](#). Online. Accessed 11 October 2021.

<sup>6</sup> UK Government, 2021. [Levelling Up Fund: prospectus](#). Online. Accessed 11 October 2021.

## The Causes

Scotland's dispersed population and geography pose distinct challenges for broadband provision. Of particular concern during the Action Project research was the repeated observation that rural communities feel overlooked because of lower population density. One participant felt people's attitude was:

*"Why would I bother listening to you when you've only got a few people living in the area."  
(Community conversation participant)*

Several participants expressed concerns that investment in areas seemed to follow population size.

A continued lack of high speed broadband was recognised as a big risk to rural populations. There was a shared aspiration for improving access to high speed broadband across Scotland to ensure equity of opportunity.

## Balquhidder case study

Unable to access high speed fibre broadband connectivity in the Balquhidder area of Stirlingshire, local residents took action to deliver a service they saw as critical to the future sustainability of the area.

An initial survey of local residents and businesses established what service everyone currently had, and what their future needs were likely to be. They formed a Community Interest Company and volunteers worked to secure funding. It took years to secure the funding from multiple sources and to make the project happen the community dug the ditches in order to get the cable laid.<sup>7</sup>

European LEADER funding was critical for the project. A key challenge facing the group was the perceived high risk for investors in a Community Interest Company, led by volunteers. Their full story is told in video [here](#).

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<sup>7</sup> Forth Valley and Lomond LEADER, 2018. [Balquhidder community broadband project](#). Online. Accessed 11 October 2021.

## Progress to date

The R100 scheme to reach premises that were previously missed by the Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband Programme is progressing but not as fast as was initially hoped. Severe contractual delays on LOT1 (North of Scotland) will impact thousands of people.

The Scottish Government expects the build in the LOT 1 contract to be completed during the financial year 2026/27 and includes laying subsea cables to 15 islands.<sup>8</sup>

As capability is developing quickly the UK and Scottish Governments have worked together to upgrade technology on some of the existing rollouts already underway. The R100 programme received funding from the UK Government's £5bn Project Gigabit scheme to convert more of LOT 2 (Central Scotland) from Fibre to the Cabinet (FTTC) to Fibre to the Premises (FTTP).

This is a significant area for investment for the Scottish Government at £579m of the c. £604.5m investment – the remainder is £25.5m from the UK Government (which includes the original £21m and an additional £4.5m announced to convert R100 premises from FTTC to FTTP in Central Scotland). The contractor BT is also investing c.£50m.<sup>9</sup>

With LOT 2 (Central Scotland) already benefiting from additional investment, the October 2021 budget announced *"a further £8 million from Project Gigabit to deliver full fibre to 3,600 premises in Scotland including Aberdeenshire, Angus, Highland, Moray and Perth and Kinross"*<sup>10</sup> which appears to be a welcome expansion of the partnership of Project Gigabit and the R100 scheme.

The critical nature of high speed broadband connection and the need for collaboration between governments was highlighted in the 2020 Scottish Government publication, *Towards a Robust, Resilient Wellbeing Economy for Scotland: report of the advisory group on economic recovery*.



Source: Scottish Government, 2021

<sup>8</sup> ISPreview, 2021. [Scotland Unveil Fibre Broadband Rollout to 15 Islands via R100](#). Online. Accessed 11th October 2021.

<sup>9</sup> ISPreview, 2021. [Openreach's Director of Fibre Build Talks Scotland's R100 Rollout](#). Online. Accessed 11th October 2021.

<sup>10</sup> UK Treasury accessed 27th October 2021

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1028835/261021\\_Regional\\_fact\\_sheets\\_v4\\_Tuesday\\_230pm.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1028835/261021_Regional_fact_sheets_v4_Tuesday_230pm.pdf)

One area that is holding back R100 progress, and remains a daily challenge for contractors, is property access or wayleaves. There is a higher density of networks on private land in Scotland than elsewhere in the UK. This is a reserved policy area where the contractor is calling for more help to make faster progress.

*“In one community, for example, 20 residents refusing access or not allowing work on their property affects 560 other homes and businesses. For R100 we need roughly one wayleave for every 15 premises – so that’s 7,000 successful agreements!”*

*Andrew Hepburn, BT Openreach*

## **Conclusion**

An ageing population and outward migration are significant risks for large parts of rural Scotland. High speed broadband is proven to improve business and education opportunities as well as access to public services.

The Scottish and UK Governments must complete rollout of high speed broadband to all rural communities as part of the levelling up agenda and economic recovery from covid. This means any further opportunity to future proof LOT 1 and LOT 3 during installation with additional funding through the UK Government Gigabit scheme or other funding such as levelling up should be taken.

The two governments must continue to work together and with the contractor, to see what can be done to accelerate progress. Identifying and taking action in any area where delivery of superfast broadband risks being further delayed is critical to ensure no community is left behind.