

Rt Hon Sir John Whittingdale OBE MP
Minister of State for Media, Tourism and
Creative Industries and
Minister of State (Minister for Data
And Digital Infrastructure)
Department for Science,
Innovation and Technology
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November 14th, 2023

Shared Rural Network – consequences of 95% 4G geographical coverage target

Dear Minister Sir John Whittingdale,

I am contacting you on behalf of a coalition of community, conservation and outdoor recreation groups regarding the Shared Rural Network (SRN). While we fully support the principle of improving connectivity for rural communities and businesses, we are highly concerned about the deployment of the programme in Scotland's wild and sparsely populated landscapes.

The programme is based on a geographic target, rather than a needs-based target, which fails to distinguish the clusters of settlement and expanses of land where digital connectivity is not essential to meet the policy outcome. We have specific examples where the consequences of the geographical coverage target are resulting in planning applications for masts in areas of Scotland where there are no roads, business premises or local households that would benefit from the increased mobile coverage.

The consequence of the current scattered, unfocused programme rollout is not only a potential under-utilisation of infrastructure and waste of significant public funds, but significant, avoidable, harm to nationally important landscapes, protected areas and irreplaceable habitats such as ancient woodland. We are particularly concerned about applications where new access tracks are being proposed in wild and remote areas, as these will significantly impact the character of the landscape.

We have recently approached Mr Glenn Preston, Director of Ofcom Scotland, to seek an adjustment to the SRN delivery programme. We would also like to appeal to your powers as a Minister to review the geographical coverage target, which appears to be driving applications for masts in areas where there is no demand or additional benefit to communities' connectivity that could justify the significant costs to public finance and to the UK's finest landscapes.

We appreciate how busy your agenda is, but we would like to kindly ask you for the opportunity to discuss this urgent situation in a 30-minute meeting.

Yours sincerely

Mike Daniels
Head of Policy
John Muir Trust

Stuart Younie
Chief Executive Officer
Mountaineering Scotland

On behalf of
Action to Protect Rural Scotland

Community Land Scotland
John Muir Trust
Mountaineering Scotland
North-East Mountain Trust
Ramblers Scotland
Scottish Wild Land Group
The Knoydart Foundation
The Munro Society
The National Trust for Scotland
Woodland Trust Scotland