

NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE COMMISSION

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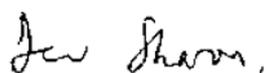
Ofcom

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I am writing further to the publication of Ofcom's annual report on the UK's communications infrastructure, *Connected Nations 2017*. The report provides a welcome update on the state of fixed broadband and mobile services.

I welcome the work Ofcom has undertaken over the last year to develop a new approach for defining mobile coverage based on consumers' everyday experience. This is an important step forward in providing people with genuine and meaningful information about mobile reception in their area and was a central finding of the NIC's report into 5G and telecommunications technology, *Connected Future*, published last year. A large scale public awareness campaign is now required to ensure consumers can access this information quickly and easily when choosing their mobile network.

More worryingly, the latest assessment of mobile coverage across the UK confirms that levels of coverage are in reality around 10 percentage points lower than previously claimed by Mobile Network Operators (MNOs).

Despite licence obligations that were intended to provide coverage to 90% of the UK's landmass by the end of 2017, large parts of the country remain without reliable coverage – with almost a third of the UK's geography unable to receive a signal from all four operators.

Poor rural coverage remains an issue of concern, with nearly four out of every five premises unable to receive an indoor 4G service. Meanwhile many people are struggling to get a decent signal on the UK's railways.

It is now clear following Ofcom's field testing that significantly higher mobile signal strengths are required to deliver a good consumer experience. To this end, I believe Ofcom should apply technical licence conditions to the 700MHz band, requiring improved geographic coverage and higher signal levels if necessary, in advance of its auction to MNOs next year.

Given the legally binding nature of the agreement signed with network operators in 2014/15 to improve mobile coverage I would expect Ofcom to consider all possible enforcement action against any operator which does not meet its obligation to provide coverage to 90% of the UK's landmass by the end of 2017, based on existing signal strength thresholds.

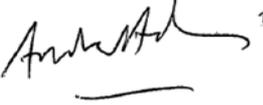
In addition, given the seriousness and scale of gaps in the UK's mobile coverage, I believe Ofcom should urgently propose an action plan to government for radically improving mobile coverage in the short to medium term. I appreciate that policy development is the responsibility of Government, but on the basis of Ofcom's new approach to measuring coverage and its expertise in the sector, I believe Ofcom has a key responsibility to advise government to ensure the nation's vital mobile communications infrastructure meets acceptable standards. A range of policies should be considered including, but not limited to, re-examining the case for roaming in areas where there are 'not spots', making better use of existing spectrum and encouraging MNOs to share masts where possible.

As our interim National Infrastructure Assessment notes, there is increasing convergence between mobile and fixed networks, with 5G deployment dependent on access to full fibre networks. I understand that DCMS is currently undertaking a review of the telecoms sector to maximise investment in these next generation technologies, and hope that all policy options will be explored within this context.

I believe it is now crucial that all options are considered to radically improve mobile coverage across the UK and ensure that consumers receive the service they pay for and deserve.

With mobile telecommunications now firmly established at the heart of modern society and the economy, and ubiquitous access to mobile networks increasingly viewed by consumers as a basic right, a step change in mobile coverage is required. I trust you will consider the above suggestions as you look to use the full force of Ofcom's powers to improve the current situation.

Perhaps we could meet in January to discuss these issues in person. I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Minister of State for Digital.

Yours ever,


ANDREW ADONIS

Cc: Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP, Secretary of State for DCMS
Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP, Minister of State for Digital