

New laws to wipe out rural mobile 'not spots' and speed up rollout of next-generation 5G technology

- Measures to eliminate mobile signal blindspots in rural areas and on roads
- Changes to planning laws will create huge opportunities for rural economy and unlock potential of 5G to improve lives
- Reforms will protect countryside and reduce the number of new rural masts needed
- Comes as Telecoms Diversification Taskforce publishes report on 5G supply chain

The government is proposing law changes to boost ongoing efforts to improve connectivity for people who live, work and travel in rural areas.

The reforms will remove one of the biggest barriers to better coverage in the countryside by reducing build time and costs for new infrastructure while protecting rural areas by minimising any visual impact.

Under the proposals, mobile companies will be allowed to make new and existing masts up to five metres taller and two metres wider than current rules permit. This will increase the range of masts and allow operators to fit more equipment on them so they can be more easily shared.

The move will turbocharge the delivery of the £1 billion Shared Rural Network being built to eliminate 4G mobile 'not spots' in the countryside and will speed up rollout of next-generation 5G networks.

It will incentivise mobile firms to focus on improving existing masts over building new ones, with fewer new masts needed for rural communities to get a better signal now and to take full advantage of future 5G-connected technology. This includes innovations in remote healthcare, self-driving vehicles and smart devices such as fridges, TVs and heating systems.

Stricter rules will apply in protected areas, including national parks, the Broads, conservation areas, areas of outstanding natural beauty and world heritage sites.

The plans also include proposals to bring better mobile coverage for road users by allowing building-based masts to be placed nearer to highways.

The news comes as industry experts and academics set out recommendations on how to reduce the UK's reliance on a small number of equipment vendors in the telecoms supply chain.

Digital Secretary Oliver Dowden said:

We want to level up the country and end the plague of patchy and poor mobile signals in rural communities.

Today we are setting out plans to make it easier for mobile firms to transform connectivity in the countryside and propel villages and towns out of the digital dark ages – providing a welcome boost for millions of families, businesses and visitors.

These practical changes strike a careful balance between removing unnecessary barriers holding back better coverage, while making sure we protect our precious landscape.

Most new masts will still need to be approved by local authorities, which will have a say on where they are placed and their appearance. Robust conditions and limits will remain in place to make sure communities and stakeholders are properly consulted and the environment is protected.

Hamish MacLeod, Director of Mobile UK, said:

We welcome the proposals set out in this consultation which will provide better certainty and flexibility to technological changes required to build world-class mobile networks. We urge the Government that to assist mobile companies to meet its ambitious targets for deployment, it brings about legislative change as quickly as possible.

A joint [technical consultation](#) between the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has been published today with details of the changes. It follows an [earlier consultation](#) in 2019 on the principle of the reforms.

The consultation seeks views on reforms to permitted development rights in England:

- Existing mobile masts to be strengthened without prior approval, so that they can be upgraded for 5G and shared between mobile operators. This would allow increases to the width of existing masts by up to either 50% or two metres (whichever is greatest), and in unprotected areas allow increases in height up to a maximum of 25 metres (previously 20 metres). Greater increases will also be permitted subject to approval by the local authority.
- New masts to be built up to five metres higher – meaning a maximum of 30 metres in unprotected areas and 25 metres in protected areas, subject to approval by the planning authority.
- Greater freedoms for slimline ‘monopole’ masts up to 15 metres in

height, which are less visually intrusive than standard masts and used for 5G rollout, in unprotected areas. This could mean operators notifying local authorities of their intention to proceed without needing prior approval. This would align it with current rights that telecoms operators have for telegraph poles.

- Building-based masts to be placed nearer to highways to bring better mobile coverage to road networks, subject to prior approval, and in unprotected areas smaller building-based masts to be permitted without prior approval.
- Cabinets containing radio equipment to be deployed alongside masts without prior approval and to allow greater flexibility for installing cabinets in existing compounds – fenced-off sites containing masts and other communications equipment – to support new 5G networks.

DCMS will also lead on a new code of practice for mobile network operators. This will provide updated guidance on how operators and local authorities can work together to build communications infrastructure the country needs. It will also contain best practice for the siting of new infrastructure, particularly in protected areas, and ensuring stakeholders are properly consulted.

The consultation will run for eight weeks and closes on 14 June 2021.

Telecoms Diversification Taskforce – final report

Led by former BT boss Lord Livingston of Parkhead, the Telecoms Diversification Taskforce was set up by the government to provide independent advice on how to boost competition and innovation in the UK telecoms market and build an open, sustainable and diverse supply chain.

It follows the government's decision to remove Huawei equipment from UK 5G networks by 2027. While necessary to protect national security, it means the UK will be reliant on only two other 5G equipment suppliers: Nokia and Ericsson.

The [taskforce's report](#) will support the government as it delivers its £250 million [Diversification Strategy](#), mitigating the resilience risks to 5G networks ahead of the 2027 deadline so people can have confidence accessing the economic and social benefits brought by 5G. It recommends:

- Working through telecoms standards-setting bodies to encourage best practice in security and open networks;
- Creating the right environment for diversification through policy interventions – for example, setting out a timetable for the winding down of 2G and 3G networks to support the entry of new vendors into the UK market;
- Identifying interventions and investment to accelerate the development and adoption of Open Radio Access Network technology, including setting

up a fund for developing new products and ensuring testing facilities such as the UK Telecoms Lab and SONIC meet industry needs;

- Identifying opportunities to invest in long-term research and innovation to build UK capability for current and future generations of telecoms technology.

Now the taskforce has completed its work, the government will study the findings and respond fully in due course.

Matt Warman, Minister for Digital Infrastructure, said:

Our £250 million strategy will unleash a wave of innovation across the UK and make sure companies have a wide range of revolutionary 5G technology to choose from that is trusted and secure.

I welcome today's report from the Telecoms Diversification Taskforce. It will be instrumental in helping us prepare our networks for next-generation mobile technologies. We will now consider its recommendations and respond in due course.

Lord Livingston of Parkhead, Chair of the Taskforce, said:

It has been a privilege to lead the Taskforce and help drive forward the government's important work to diversify the telecoms supply chain and reduce reliance on high-risk vendors.

The government's Diversification Strategy set out a clear ambition and the Taskforce has suggested concrete actions and policy recommendations to help it meet its aims.

The UK now has the opportunity to create a more diverse network and be an international leader in the adoption of next-generation network technology. This will present substantial opportunities for UK based suppliers and users alike.

I would like to thank all of the Taskforce, made up of an outstanding team of experts from industry and academia, for their commitment and expertise in producing this report.

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

Shared Rural Network

- The [government announced](#) on 9 March 2020 that it had agreed a £1 billion deal with the four Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) for a shared network of new and existing phone masts in partial not spots (areas where there is currently coverage from at least one, but not all operators) and total not spots (areas where there is currently no coverage from any

operator). We are already starting to see improvements as a result of the SRN programme:

- Devauden in Wales became the first rural community to benefit from the programme, when a mast went live in the village on 17 June 2020. This was followed by Longnor in the Peak District on 23 July.
- On 27 January 2021, the operators O2, Three and Vodafone announced a new joint venture to build and share 222 new mobile masts to boost rural coverage across the United Kingdom and deliver the first stage of the SRN. This programme of investment will increase coverage in each of the UK nations – 124 new sites will be built in Scotland, 33 in Wales, 11 in Northern Ireland, and 54 in England, with each operator leading on 74 of the new sites.
- On 23 February 2021 EE announced it will upgrade more than 500 4G sites in 2021 as part of the SRN to extend coverage in rural areas across the UK. This will include 333 in England, 132 in Scotland, 76 in Wales, and 38 in Northern Ireland.