

Press release: Church spires to boost digital connectivity in rural areas

The [accord](#) (PDF, 74.9KB, 3 pages) , signed by the the National Church Institutions (NCIs) of the Church of England, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) encourages the Church of England to use its buildings and other property to improve broadband, mobile and WiFi connectivity for local communities.

65% of Anglican churches and 66% of parishes in England are in rural areas and their locations at the heart of their communities mean they are often well placed to address connectivity and coverage problems.

The use of these churches, as well as other church properties and farm buildings, to host digital infrastructure will help to deliver the Government's commitment for everyone to get good quality mobile connectivity where they live, work and travel.

DCMS Secretary of State, Matt Hancock said:

Churches are central features and valued assets for local communities up and down the country. This agreement with the Church of England will mean that even a 15th century building can help make Britain fit for the future improving people's lives by boosting connectivity in some of our hardest-to-reach areas.

Through its Industrial Strategy, the Government is continually driving the UK's connectivity, telecommunications and digital sectors, and investing in the skills, industries and infrastructure of the future.

Improved digital connectivity will bring a range of benefits to rural communities, including:

- better access to online public services
- improved social interaction with family and friends
- effective online presence meaning that local businesses can extend their reach and better compete with other
- businesses, or in the case of tourism businesses, better attract visitors to the local area
- better access to skills and training which can lead to further local employment opportunities that deliver
- improved productivity and can boost the wider local economy.

The Dioceses of Chelmsford and Norwich are already supporting programmes which use Church buildings to improve connectivity in rural areas. It is hoped the accord will be instrumental in encouraging more local dioceses and parishes to positively consider how they can use their property in this way.

The Bishop of Chelmsford, Rt Revd Stephen Cottrell, said:

We know that rural churches in particular have always served as a hub for their communities. Encouraging churches to improve connectivity will help tackle two of the biggest issues rural areas face – isolation and sustainability.

The Diocese of Chelmsford has been pioneering this approach with County Broadband since 2013. Our work has significantly improved rural access to high-speed broadband.

Many new forms of technology are available to improve internet access in rural areas and I hope that this partnership between the Church of England and the Government will help rural churches consider how they can be part of the solution. I know that many churches already help people access the internet and provide digital skills training, and this Accord is a natural extension of great work already occurring.

The Bishop of Norwich, Rt Revd Graham James, said:

I welcome this agreement. It builds on what we have been seeking to do in the Diocese of Norwich since 2011 with the creation of WiSpire, a company seeking to use church towers and spires to enable Wifi connectivity in communities, especially in rural locations.

Our parish churches are a truly national network, and to use them creatively to create new forms of connectivity enhances their value for the communities they serve.

Hamish Macleod, Director Mobile UK, said:

Mobile UK welcomes this announcement from Government and the Church of England, which emphasises the benefits of mobile connectivity to local communities.

Where there is a need, a suitable building is available and appropriate terms can be agreed, the mobile operators will continue to extend their use of churches to increase mobile coverage and capacity, while respecting the church environment.

Rural Affairs Minister Lord Gardiner said:

It is vitally important people living in the countryside have the same opportunities as those in urban areas, and that means having strong mobile and broadband infrastructures in place.

This initiative marks an important step in our continued drive to connect better our rural communities and bridge the digital divide.

Clear guidance set out by both the Church and Historic England ensures that any telecoms infrastructure deployed does not impact on the character and architectural or historic significance of churches.

Under the accord the Government has also pledged to provide advice for parishes and dioceses to enable them to consider supporting digital connectivity and to develop the necessary skills for digital infrastructure projects.

There is the possibility that similar accords could be made with other faith communities that have similar estates.

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Notes to Editors

Owing to varying terrain and different community needs the Accord covers all types of mobile and broadband technologies – churches are free to explore different options to meet the needs of their communities.

There are more than 120 cases of broadband and mobile services being delivered from parish churches across the country. These take a number of forms – from wireless transmitters in church spires and church towers, to aerials, satellite dishes, and more traditional fibre cables. The Church of England has just over 16,000 church buildings in 12,500 parishes.

[Church of England](#) and [Historic England](#) guidance on the installation of telecoms equipment in churches

At a round table meeting with rural Church of England Bishops, convened by the Bishop of St Albans, Rt Rev Alan Smith, and representatives of the fixed and mobile operators on 13 December 2017, chaired by the then Minister for Digital, Matt Hancock, and the Minister for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity, Lord Gardiner, it was agreed that an accord between the Church and Government would help make clear the importance of connectivity and support in principle for using Church assets to host fibre and mobile infrastructure.

Joint [accord](#) (PDF, 74.9KB, 3 pages) on Use of Church Land and Buildings to Support Digital Connectivity