



East of England
All Party Parliamentary Group

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Dear Simon Fell, MP and Rural Digital Connectivity Champion

I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing to you on behalf of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the East of England to express our gratitude for your participation in our recent meeting on Tuesday 12th September on 'Levelling up digital connectivity in the East of England'.

Your insights on what can be done to achieve greater connectivity contributed to an informative, and valuable discussion. We are thankful for your time and engagement with our group's work, and eagerly await the findings of your upcoming report.

As we heard during the meeting, progress is being made in the East of England. Full Fibre availability is up from 20% in 2021 to over 50% in 2023 whilst 74% of premises having gigabit-capable connections. Meanwhile 77% of premises now have access to 5G mobile coverage (and 79% have 4G) – however these are the second lowest regional figure in England. These averages therefore conceal large divergences within the East, with some areas having considerably poorer coverage.

Even though full fibre, with all its price and quality benefits, is available to an increasing number of homes and businesses in the region, only a small fraction are taking it up. Not only does this disadvantage consumers who, despite having access, are being held back from signing up to a better and often cheaper service, it also has the potential to undermine the case for further investment in full fibre rollout in regions like the East of England.

It was pointed out that a quarter of UK SMEs do not use basic digital tools such as e-commerce accounting and HR software which have been proven to boost growth and resilience. One of the other challenges highlighted by the speaker from techUK was a "Skills and Adoption Challenge", including the fact that by 2030, around 20% of the workforce could be under-skilled for their job requirement.

Continued investment in new full fibre networks, which is crucial for rural connectivity, is only possible if consumers are empowered and enabled to take it up. While the Government and Ofcom have been right to focus on rapid rollout up to this point, the market is now in a new phase – one where levels of consumer take up are crucial to unlocking further investment.

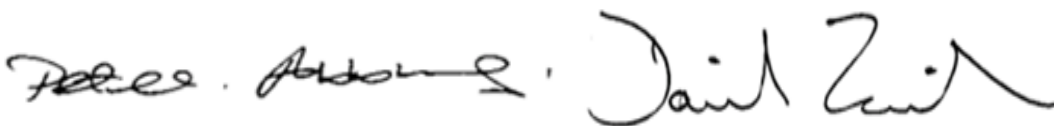
As was discussed at the meeting, the APPG looks forward to your upcoming report and would encourage you to consider the following six key points:

- Accelerating the national Gigabit procurement programme and including Essex at the earliest opportunity.
- The potential of local Government to have a greater role in ensuring digital connectivity especially in hard-to-reach areas, including the exploration of new local driven funding mechanisms to deliver connectivity to areas not currently in scope (such as working with the provider-led Shared Rural Network programme to identify areas in need of intervention.)
- A Government-led information campaign to educate consumers about next-generation technologies, the beneficial impacts they could have on their lives and businesses, and to drive take-up.
- Introduction of clear and consistent terminology around the advertising of broadband products to allow people to make informed decisions about their connections.
- The implementation of a flexible street works permitting regime, easing the administrative burden of both Local Authorities and network builders.
- Ensure that the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology works with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to increase the capacity of councils' planning departments to accelerate delivery of vital infrastructure and/or a change to Permitted Development Rights to enable faster siting of the data centres which sit at the heart of full fibre broadband networks.

We believe that these key steps will help drive the crucial take-up of new technologies, and unlock further investment to benefit the East of England and the nation as a whole. We also look forward to seeing your recommendations to lay the groundwork for legal and regulatory changes, as you mentioned these would be part of the report's long-term aims.

Thank you once again for your time and the work you are doing in this area. We appreciate your dedication to these issues and your commitment to serving our region and others like them.

Yours sincerely



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