

**CHURCH OF ENGLAND AND HM GOVERNMENT**  
**JOINT ACCORD ON USE OF CHURCH LAND AND BUILDINGS TO SUPPORT DIGITAL**  
**CONNECTIVITY**

**18 FEBRUARY 2018**

This Accord is between the National Church Institutions of the Church of England (“the NCIs”) and Her Majesty’s Government acting through the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity (“HMG”).

**Background**

The NCIs and HMG recognise that a modern telecommunications infrastructure is vital for a vibrant economy and inclusive society. By working together with mobile and broadband providers, we believe that we can help deliver improved connectivity, particularly in rural areas, and thereby bring about important practical benefits to congregations, local communities, local businesses and visitors alike.

We recognise that it may be possible to use some Church of England churches and other Church-held buildings or land to host digital infrastructure. This Accord recognises that, consistent with the long-standing role played by church buildings as a focus of community cohesion and spirit, by encouraging the wider use of such assets we can help improve connectivity and its consequential benefits to those areas where coverage does not currently exist, or where it is of poorer quality.

**Objective**

With that objective in view, this Accord is intended to set out our common understanding of the benefits which may result from improved digital connectivity, and the aspirations of the NCIs and HMG in relation to the use of Church land and buildings (“Church property”) to support digital connectivity, in particular through the hosting of infrastructure to provide broadband, mobile and WiFi connectivity to areas where this is currently sub-optimal. This Accord recognises that the NCIs cannot and do not seek to speak on behalf of the autonomous legal entities and office holders at a parish, diocesan and national level. This Accord is not a legally binding document and does not create obligations which can be enforced against HMG or NCIs or any other Church entity. Each Church entity must take its own decision regarding the use of property for which it has responsibility. This Accord seeks to encourage Church entities to consider and promote the benefits which may result from hosting digital infrastructure and sets out the steps which HMG and the NCIs intend to take.

**Detail**

Improvements in digital connectivity have a wide range of benefits. Such benefits may include better access to online public services, improved social interaction with family and friends and the ability to take advantage of all the digital economy has to offer. An effective online presence can ensure 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. Greater connectivity can support access to skills and training, resulting in

improved productivity, and can lead to further local employment opportunities that boost the wider local economy.

The ability to communicate with others is a prerequisite for many aspects of the Church's mission. It follows that these benefits will assist the mission of the Church, consistent with its desire, given effect through its Renewal and Reform programme, to become a growing church for all people and for all places. Improved communications can of themselves constitute valuable, practical care for those within a parish or community.

Other possible pastoral benefits may result from wider connectivity, including improvements in the Churches' own contact with parishioners who find travel and transport difficult, older members of the community, and those who may be isolated, particularly in rural areas. Where online channels are more widely available, they can be used as part of outreach activities and to build community with and beyond the church congregation. In addition, improved connectivity can allow churches to host a wider variety of community services such as Post Offices, shops or GP surgeries. Finally, the terms of any agreement with telecoms providers to host infrastructure may have other benefits, including not only the income generated by the agreement (noting the expected reductions in such payments that are anticipated as a result of the recent Electronic Communications Code reforms), but also the potential for other mutually beneficial terms, to be agreed, such as sharing the cost of maintaining a church tower or spire on which equipment may be mounted.

Individual parishes, and others with responsibility for Church buildings and land, will need to consider all the factors concerned with using Church land or buildings to host digital connectivity infrastructure. This Accord encourages them to do so within the context of their own priorities for mission, relevant planning controls, and their legal obligations both as an organisation and relating to the care of Church property, and appropriate guidance provided by the Church Buildings Council and Historic England. This recognises that the Church comprises a number of autonomous entities and office holders with different legal obligations and that the property may also be subject to third party agreements. Such entities may also have their own aspirations for the use and development of their properties in support of the Church's mission. Similarly, dioceses will, through their Diocesan Advisory Committees (DACs), need to balance the identified benefits of telecoms provision in the particular circumstances of the parish with other relevant factors.

### **Actions**

In the interests of promoting improved digital connectivity: The NCIs and HMG propose to take the following steps:

- HMG will take action to support improved connectivity across the UK, including in rural areas, and will continue to work with mobile and broadband operators to encourage investment that will deliver connectivity improvements. HMG will offer support, where appropriate, to help resolve barriers to delivering this ambition, and will help facilitate discussion between all parties.

- HMG will seek to provide advice and resource, as appropriate, to the NCIs to support the NCIs' efforts to enable individual dioceses, parishes and other landowners to consider supporting digital connectivity.
- HMG will do its best to provide coaching support for parishes and dioceses to help them develop the necessary skills needed to develop and progress digital infrastructure projects.
- HMG will encourage mobile and broadband operators to work proactively and pragmatically with owners of Church property to achieve the aims set out in this Accord, recognising that telecommunications infrastructure has siting and design requirements, and that the parties will need to put in place a suitable and commercially robust agreement.
- The NCIs will encourage where possible the development of guidance for dioceses, parishes and Chancellors which has in view a consistent approach to the use of Church property to enable digital connectivity.
- The NCIs will co-operate with mobile and broadband operators, to seek to establish a standard framework contract that could be put in place for church entities to use in contracting for connectivity in areas with no conventional wired broadband provision. Development of this framework contract will be at the operators' cost and in full knowledge that individual agreements will have to be negotiated with parishes or other landowners, and that these are not required to use such a framework contract.
- The NCIs will include digital connectivity within the remit of the Media Bishops Group. The Media Bishops Group will act as a conduit between the NCIs and dioceses in relation to any policy questions which arise.

**The Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport**

**Lord Gardiner of Kimble, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity**

**Mr William Nye LVO – Secretary General of the Archbishops' Council**

**The Rt Revd Dr David Walker, Bishop of Manchester – Deputy Chair of the Church Commissioners**