



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Ref: CF46028/ER

11 December 2018

Margot James MP
Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries
Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport
100 Parliament Street
London
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United Kingdom

Dear Margot

Response to consultation on broadband in new-build homes

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your consultation on delivering better broadband to new build developments.

I admire the Government's commitment to get 95% of properties in the UK to have Superfast Broadband, and its recognition via this consultation that new build home-owners are not receiving the connections they deserve. This lack of connectivity to new build homes is compounded when these properties are built in rural and semi-rural areas, which already have patchy coverage at best.

I represent Don Valley, a semi-rural constituency close to Doncaster, made up of 30 small towns and villages. Whilst the UK average for full fibre availability is 4.8%, only 0.4% of Don Valley homes have full fibre available. We have also had specific problems with new build housing estates, where housing developers and Openreach have not included fibre broadband as part of building new estates.

Evidence

You ask in your consultation for evidence on the state of new build developments in the UK. Here I provide two case studies from my constituency casework for you to consider.

Working for Don Valley

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Manor Farm / Warren Park

Area: Bessacarr – within Finningley Ward

Developer: Persimmon Homes

Rough Number of Properties Expected Post Completion: 1100

Planning Permission Granted: 2014

A constituent first raised the issue of poor broadband in June 2017. The constituent's house had only been completed in 2017 but was unable to receive fibre broadband. The constituent was reporting download speeds of less than 1 mb/s.

As part of the development, a new broadband cabinet was installed at the top of the estate to serve these properties. Openreach did not offer fibre broadband as an option for this cabinet and so Persimmon were left to accept a copper cabinet connection.

Only after persistence from the constituent and an intervention from my office was an agreement reached for fibre to be provided to the estate. In March 2018, Persimmon agreed to fund 5% of the fibre upgrade costs, with Openreach covering the other 95%. The upgrade is expected to take 12 months, and after contacting Persimmon in December, the expected committed contractual date is confirmed for 6 March 2019.

Yew Gardens

Area: Edlington – within Edlington and Warmsworth Ward

Developer: Keepmoat Homes

Rough Number of Properties Expected Post Completion: 380

Planning Permission Granted: 2012

A constituent raised the issue of poor broadband at the Yew Gardens development in June 2018. The constituent's house was built in 2014 and only had access to 0.5 mb/s broadband.

The issue was the same as the previous estate – Openreach had not offered a fibre connection to the associated broadband cabinet during planning and development stages, which meant that Keepmoat Homes had to accept the basic copper cabinet.

A quote from Keepmoat Home's representative: "I can confirm that, unfortunately, at the time we were designing the Edlington scheme we did not have the option to select fibre. This was very frustrating as a developer as there were many sites progressing with copper, at a time when fibre had already become well-known technology and could quite easily have been future proofing new housing schemes".

The solution came by way of a co-funding agreement between Keepmoat Homes and Openreach to upgrade the broadband cabinet to fibre.

Lessons from these cases

Both of these cases include retrospective upgrading to fibre broadband, meaning fibre will be to the cabinet, rather than to the premises. This will mean these estates will be



able to access superfast fibre (somewhere over 24 mb/s), but would require further infrastructural work to have fibre to premises.

Both of these examples strike me as making more work than is necessary. Your assumption, that deploying the necessary infrastructure to deliver gigabit-capable networks is best achieved when the site is being built, is one I agree with. Deploying this infrastructure should be done at the point of building. I hope these case studies will help you to provide evidence to affirm this assumption.

Rural broadband

Despite the large number of properties in both Manor Farm and Yew Gardens, what adds to the frustration for my constituents is that these housing developments are situated in semi-rural areas, who have not benefitted from the same commercial investment in broadband as urban developments.

I have met with Openreach who told me that the Government have earmarked £2bn of the expected £35bn cost to fund broadband in non-commercially viable areas, expecting the market to furnish the rest. Whilst I welcome the Government's commitment to investment and its 'outside-in' approach to providing broadband in hard-to-reach areas, I would appreciate clarification on what this means in practice on boosting broadband in rural areas, which the market neglects.

Role of developers and local authorities

Openreach seemed open to dialogue with housebuilders – indeed, you reference their offer of free fibre connections to housing developments with over 30 dwellings in your consultation. In our meeting, they expressed concerns that whilst some developers were open to discussion, others were closed to dialogue.

Openreach also flagged that they often had problems aligning with local authorities to gain buy-in for infrastructure improvements. The Government, Openreach, local authorities and developers should share a responsibility to ensure good connectivity.

This is particularly stark when I speak to first time buyers using the Government's Help to Buy Scheme to purchase new build properties. Good connectivity is now expected as a minimum, with upgrades up to the discretion of the homeowner.

The Government, as you state, currently requires developers to proactively engage with network operators, which is a great first step. Have you considered going one step further and reclassifying broadband as a utility? Reclassification could simplify the process, and by updating existing processes, provides continuity to developers.

It is now a social need that UK citizens have access to broadband, which is now integral to accessing government services. Examples include the Government's own Gateway; accessing the Universal Credit portal; and doing online banking, particularly when banks in rural areas are closing rapidly.

**Conclusion**

I am pleased that improving technology for all is a priority for DCMS and was encouraged by the release of the consultation. I hope that as a result of this commitment, I will not for much longer have to take calls from my constituents in new build homes about their bad broadband.

*Yours
Caroline*

Rt Hon Caroline Flint MP