



Sir Chris Bryant MP
Minister of State for Data Protection and Telecoms
Department of Science, Innovation and Technology

Via email -
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Dear Sir Chris

I would like to raise my serious concerns about the lack of progress that the Government's Project Gigabit programme is making in connecting homes and businesses across Kent.

As you will be aware, good broadband connectivity is essential to enable any business to thrive and for residents to access the services and opportunities they need.

It is now over three years since the procurement work for the Kent phase of the Project Gigabit contract started and the broadband voucher scheme stopped - and we have yet to see the announcement by Building Digital UK of any properties connected. In contrast, Kent County Council procured, mobilised and delivered the first superfast broadband contract, connecting over 123,000 premises within 3.5 years. We understand the complexities and challenges involved in building broadband infrastructure in hard-to-reach areas but it is difficult to understand why it is taking so long for these much needed connections to be delivered, at the pace required.

I am also concerned about the lack of information available to local residents and businesses about when, and where, these planned connections will be delivered. There is still no national premise checker on gov.uk that residents and businesses can access to work out whether they are in Building Digital UK's plans for connection – or *when* they are likely to get connected. The latter is a real concern for consumers who don't want to get locked into contracts with communication providers who can't offer services on the new infrastructure. We appreciate that plans will change during the planning, survey and build phases but county councils were previously required by Building Digital UK to publish maps and easy-to-understand checkers for local residents and businesses for the entire indicative plan. Please can you urgently intervene to ensure that the same levels of transparency are applied to these contracts by Building Digital UK.

Whilst we welcome the £112 million investment represented by the Kent and Medway City Fibre contract, this is forecast to connect just over 50,000 premises. From the surveys (Open Market Review assessments) that Building Digital UK has undertaken, it would appear that a further 100,000 premises are not in any build plans and an additional 250,000 have been classed as being in telecoms build plans that may be at risk. These are large numbers and mean that, at best, the existing Building Digital UK contract will only connect around a third of premises that are without a connection. Furthermore, the longer it takes to deliver these connections, the more public funding is likely to be required because of the impact of inflation – creating additional, and avoidable, costs for the taxpayer.

Clearly, more needs to be done and quickly – but I understand from my officers that Building Digital UK has told them that Kent is not a priority for further investment/procurement by the Project Gigabit programme.

This is simply not acceptable. Our region continues to lag substantially behind with respect to broadband connectivity while the UK's Industrial Strategy 2025 is contingent on unlocking the value of data and accelerating AI adoption across businesses. If this Government is serious about economic growth, then digital infrastructure must come first—without reliable internet access, AI is nothing more than a buzzword.

Whilst Ofcom's data on future network coverage indicates that 97% of the UK could have access to gigabit capable infrastructure by the end of 2027, the same data indicates that only 82% of premises in Kent will have access to gigabit-capable infrastructure – so why is delivering additional coverage in Kent not a priority for Building Digital UK?

Since Building Digital UK halted the successful broadband voucher scheme in Kent in April 2022, we have seen no improvement in the percentage of premises that cannot access a superfast or basic broadband service. Coupled with the difficulties of Kent residents now accessing alternative Starlink services because of a lack of capacity – and Starlink's decision to implement an additional £195 'congestion charge' for Kent residents - it is hardly surprising that many local residents and businesses are growing increasingly frustrated.

To start turning this around, I would ask that:

- 1) Building Digital UK immediately publish further information on the entire Project Gigabit deployment plan for the Kent and Medway contract, in a format that is easy to understand and accessible to Kent residents and businesses.
- 2) The broadband voucher scheme is re-opened, where there is community demand, to take forward projects that can quickly bring about improved connectivity where there are sub-superfast rural connections in Kent. This must include Openreach as a supplier.
- 3) The voucher scheme is extended to address urban connection issues. We are aware that this has recently been undertaken for some cities but similar opportunities need to be made available for Kent's towns and coastal communities.
- 4) Senior Building Digital UK managers meet with my officers to agree how the remaining out-of-scope premises in Kent can best be quickly upgraded with gigabit-capable connections by the Project Gigabit Programme.

- 5) Your office investigates how the delivery of the existing Kent Project Gigabit contract could be accelerated to ensure that these essential connections are delivered at pace.

We also have serious concerns about wayleave dependent properties and the diminishing performance of Kent's mobile network. However, I am aware that the Government has announced further plans in the new Infrastructure Strategy to tackle these issues and we will also be responding to the Government's new consultation on the 'Proposed Statement of Strategic Priorities for Telecommunications'.

In the meantime, I have asked my officers to continue to work with Building Digital UK to support the implementation of this vital project. I look forward to hearing from you as I am sure that you will agree that there can be no effective route to economic growth without having the right digital infrastructure in place, and would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul King', written in a cursive style.

Paul King

Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Coastal Regeneration

