



## Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

**Petition Number:** [PE01524](#)

**Main Petitioner:** James Macfarlane

**Subject:** Free Wi-Fi in Scottish public buildings

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to issue a code of practice setting out a minimum standard for wifi connections provided by public authorities to members of the public; and to urge all Scottish public authorities to provide wifi connections that meet this standard in all their public buildings.

### Background

The petition states that it has two goals:

1. to develop a national standard for public wifi connections; and
2. to encourage public authorities to provide public wifi that meets this standard in public buildings such as council offices, libraries, schools, hospitals and courts.

The petition notes that, although many public buildings do have a wifi connection, it is not of a high standard. It states that the following are the “desirable criteria” for a public wifi network:

- it should be available to the public throughout the opening hours of the building;
- it should provide a decent speed (e.g. over 10 Mbps);
- it should be available straight away without users having to register or login (having to ask for a password or sign up for an account can be time consuming, off-putting and unnecessary);
- it should be secure to ensure traffic cannot be intercepted;
- it should not be filtered excessively (filtering of extreme material may be necessary, but public connections often overdo this and block access to legitimate sites); and

- activity should not be monitored by the authority providing the connection (i.e. so they can see what users are doing).

The petition goes on to state that the standard would be developed in consultation with key stakeholders, incorporating the desirable criteria above. If public authorities met the standard, then they would be added to a Scottish Government register of certified wifi connections.

Cities in Scotland are currently trialling or tendering for, a range of different options for public wifi access. For example, [Glasgow City Council](#) is delivering a free public wifi system, Urban Wireless, in conjunction with BT, based on a “concession” model, and [Edinburgh City Council](#) has announced a ten year contract with GOWEX to deliver a “Wireless Smart City”. [Aberdeen City Council](#) is already working on something similar to what the petitioner is looking for, and is currently procuring a wifi service “across its property portfolio”.

Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Perth were included in the [UK Government’s “Superconnected Cities” programme](#), which set aside £150 million of funding for better broadband for small businesses and wireless coverage for city centres and public buildings with funding from Broadband Delivery UK.

## **Scottish Government Action**

In 2011, the Scottish Government published [Scotland’s Digital Future: A Strategy for Scotland](#) which sets out how the Government intends to achieve its ambition that:

- next generation broadband will be available to all by 2020, and significant progress will be made by 2015; and
- the rate of broadband uptake by people in Scotland should be at or above the UK average by 2013, and should be highest among the UK nations by 2015.

Although the Strategy does not focus on wifi provision in public buildings, it does state that:

“Technological change can make contributions to both improving outcomes and reducing costs. There is significant potential to completely transform public services, by making entirely new services and products possible. For example, it is already clear that technology will play a key role in delivering health and social services in many countries throughout the world in the 21st century. It will deliver better care for all, integrate services more cost-effectively and efficiently, and gradually become part of everyday life.

As importantly, the online delivery of public services will also provide services which are easier, quicker and more convenient for people to use, and at a lower cost than other methods allow.”

In 2012, the Government published [Scotland's Digital Future: Infrastructure Action Plan](#), which provided more information on proposed improvements to Scotland's digital infrastructure. The purpose of the Plan is to:

“deliver a step change in people's ability to access the internet, enabling people to connect from their homes, businesses and while on the move. A world-class digital infrastructure for Scotland must deliver in terms of speed and ease of access, geographical coverage, and price and choice of provision for consumers. We recognise it is particularly critical for rural and remote communities to be digitally connected in terms of economic viability and growth.”

The Plan notes that:

“All trends point towards an increase in the coverage and speeds of digital access required as the number of internet enabled devices increases and as technology continues to evolve, such as cloud computing and TV through the internet. To accommodate these trends it is clear that we will need faster, more reliable upload and download speeds and the ability to use multiple devices in our homes, hospitals, further and higher education institutions, workplaces and in our schools.”

The petition states that the petitioner wrote to the Scottish Ministers asking if they could take action to require public bodies to provide free wireless internet access to members of the public visiting their buildings. The response from the Government stated that:

"the Scottish Government currently has no plans to fund the universal provision of free Wi-Fi in public buildings, however individual organisations will consider the business case and costs on a case by case basis. This process ensures that each organisation can demonstrate value for money in delivering the service, and also that there is the customer base that requires the service".

## **Scottish Parliament Action**

In 2012, the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee published its report on [Broadband Infrastructure in Scotland](#). The remit of the inquiry was:

- to assess the coverage, availability and uptake of broadband across Scotland;
- to consider the ways in which different local areas are working to promote access to broadband in Scotland and how good practice might be shared; and
- to consider what work is required by the Scottish Government, infrastructure providers and others in order to expand Scotland's digital infrastructure.

Similar to the Government's Strategy, it did not focus specifically on provision of wifi in public buildings, but concluded that:

“the Committee welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to delivering a step change in people's ability to access the internet. The Action Plan is an important part of the drive to meet that objective.

It will be crucial, however, that the Scottish Government, in collaboration with its local authority partners, gets the implementation and delivery of the Action Plan right.

The implementation and delivery of the proposals outlined in the Action Plan will require careful evaluation as the procurement phase and project development begins. The Committee intends to take a keen interest in monitoring these processes and welcomes the Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment's offer of providing regular written and oral updates over the course of the Parliamentary session.”

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18 June 2014

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Published by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP [www.scottish.parliament.uk](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk)