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Edward Mountain MSP  
Convener, Rural Economy and Connectivity  
Committee  
Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
EH99 1SP

28 November 2019

Dear Convener,

During my appearance on 30 October, I promised to write to the Committee to provide a substantive response to Richard Lyle's comments on broadband connectivity in the village of Laid, as well as his follow-up comments on the wider issue of how communities can be supported to access existing fibre infrastructure that may be running either through or close to those communities.

As I set out in my response to the Laid community's public petition in November 2018, I can confirm that there is fibre running along the A838 through the village of Laid, forming part of the backhaul network linking the Durness and Melvich handover points. However, there are no connections within the community at this time, as the costs associated with connecting premises in the area through the Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband (DSSB) programme were considered prohibitive in terms of meeting the value for money criteria, as set out in the DSSB contract.

However, this new fibre infrastructure is open access, which will make future connections easier and more cost effective to deliver, highlighting the importance of the investment we have made, alongside our partners, in the DSSB programme – pushing fibre out deeper into rural Scotland and opening up new opportunities even where full coverage has not yet been achieved.

On the wider issue of support for communities who wish to deliver their own solutions, using existing infrastructure, the R100 programme does not preclude communities from pursuing this option.

In the event that a community, such as Laid, wished to progress their own solution, the community would need to come to an arrangement with whoever owns the infrastructure or any supplier who is willing to deliver a service, on the premise that they would seek to use that infrastructure as backhaul. In this particular case, Openreach's Community Fibre

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Partnership initiative may be of interest to residents of Laid, as I have been advised that at least some of the fibre running through the village is owned by Openreach. More information can be found at <https://www.openreach.com/fibre-broadband/community-fibre-partnerships>.

I would advise that a 2016 independent review into the Community Broadband Scotland initiative showed that, in the majority of cases, small communities simply do not want to pursue a self-build option.

With this in mind, the community may wish to explore the UK Government's 'Gigabit Broadband Voucher' scheme. 'Gigabit' vouchers can be used by small businesses and the local communities surrounding them to contribute to the installation cost of a gigabit-capable connection. Businesses can, under this scheme, claim up to £2,500 against the cost of connection either individually or as part of a group project, and residents in the surrounding area can benefit from the scheme with a voucher worth £500 as part of a group project.

However, as of May 2019, premises in more rural and remote parts of the UK may be eligible for additional funding. Rural premises with broadband speeds of less than 30 Megabits per second (Mbps) can use vouchers worth up to £3,500 for each small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs), and up to £1,500 per residential premise, to support the cost of installing new gigabit-capable connections (subject to eligibility). More information can be found at <https://gigabitvoucher.culture.gov.uk/>.

The UK Government also runs the 'Better Broadband' scheme at present, whereby any residents who are unable to achieve a download speed of 2Mbps, and who will not be the recipient of superfast broadband services within the following twelve months through alternative means, can apply for a voucher. The scheme is now supplier-led, meaning that suppliers will request vouchers on behalf of their customers. The value of the voucher will contribute to the build cost of installing a better broadband connection (a minimum of 10 Mbps) at the customer's premises, and this may provide a useful interim solution.

More information about the 'Better Broadband' scheme and how to apply can be found at <https://www.scotlandsuperfast.com/how-can-i-get-it/alternative-solutions/>. However, it should be noted that the scheme is currently scheduled to end in December 2019, and the UK Government has yet to confirm whether it plans to extend or replace it going forward.

These options are of course available to other communities and individuals and I hope this information is helpful.

*Kind regards*



**Paul Wheelhouse**

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