



Department for
Science, Innovation
& Technology

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Minister of State
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Melanie Dawes
Chief Executive Officer, Ofcom

28 August 2024

Lindsey Fussell
Group Director Networks and Communications,
Ofcom

Via email to: ChiefExecutiveOffice@ofcom.org.uk

Dear Melanie and Lindsey,

I am writing in relation to Ofcom's reporting on the availability of mobile services in the UK. I am aware that my department first raised this matter with you in 2023 and that there is an ongoing programme of work in Ofcom to improve the accuracy and consistency of coverage and performance data. While I am grateful for the work Ofcom is undertaking in this area, too little progress appears to be being made. This is delaying progress and economic recovery and leaving consumers with a very misleading picture. I am keen therefore to see a heightened degree of urgency about this.

I know from my own experience living in Porth in the Rhondda, for instance, that although Ofcom's data says I should be able to enjoy full and easy coverage, I regularly have no service at all, either outdoors or indoors. I also know from speaking to my constituents and business owners that Ofcom's published data for Porth simply do not match their experience either. This is frustrating and misleading, and I want to know why it is happening - and what can be done to improve reporting as a matter of real urgency. Obviously, my concern is not just for the Rhondda. Many other MPs have repeatedly reported similar issues. But it would be useful to see a specific report from you on the situation in Porth, if only so that I can match your reporting against lived experience.

Whilst I appreciate the challenges and complexity involved in providing accurate data at a local level, I do feel that the overall picture Ofcom paints of near-complete geographic coverage masks the fact that the performance of the networks frequently doesn't meet the expectations of users. This situation is only likely to become more acute as the capability of technology continues to evolve and demand for data continues to grow.

I understand that Ofcom's data on the availability of mobile networks is based primarily on predicted mobile signal strength taken from modelling provided by the mobile network operators. However, I am concerned that the signal strength threshold set by Ofcom to define a minimum level of coverage may no longer be sufficient to deliver the sort of network performance required to support applications that consumers might reasonably expect to be able to use. At the same time, I am conscious that reporting on signal strength alone does not necessarily correlate with the service performance experienced by the user. It may be, therefore, that we need to move to a more nuanced approach in order properly to inform consumers.



I am aware that Ofcom has been exploring the use of crowd-sourced data, taken from the use of mobile phones, for some time now. There are obviously inherent limitations of this approach in less populated areas; however, where there are data sets of sufficient size (notably in well populated areas) it would seem sensible to include them and I am keen that this is done at scale and as soon as it is feasible.

I understand that some local authorities have offered to make use of council assets such as refuse collection lorries to help gather coverage data. This sort of activity should be encouraged. I would like to understand to what extent this data can be used not only to validate Ofcom's modelled coverage data but also to supplement Ofcom's own data as provided in Connected Nations, at least as it pertains to coverage on roads.

I know that you have been considering possible approaches to measuring mobile coverage and performance on trains and I understand that the Department for Transport is taking steps on this as well. In order to inform government policy in this area, it is important that Ofcom provides regular information regarding mobile availability on the rail network, at least for busy rail lines, in the same way as it does roads. Please could you confirm what steps you are taking to report on that this year.

I would welcome an update by the end of October setting out the concrete steps that Ofcom will be taking to improve reporting of mobile coverage, and the timescales for this. I am also interested in understanding how overall coverage information would look when different measurement techniques are applied.

I cannot emphasise enough how important this matter is for me and my department. I want to get to the bottom of this issue and will seek to report on this to parliament at the earliest opportunity.

I look forward to meeting you both as soon as we can manage and discussing in detail all of the above.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Bryant". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "C" and "B".

Sir Chris Bryant MP
Minister of State for Data Protection and Telecoms