

Specification and scope of the USO

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A speed of 10Mbps is hugely unambitious; by 2020 when the USO will apply it is likely that this speed will have been overtaken in most parts of the UK where commercial connections are today already delivering speeds of around 200Mbps

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The minimum speed should be fixed at the median speed that can be received by commercially delivered broadband connections. Fixing it at 10Mbps is too rigid and will be outdated almost as soon as it is implemented. As important is the reliability of the network which in remote & rural areas is often variable. If satellite technology is utilized then improved latency is vital.

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With regard to deploying the most appropriate technology, we accept that but would wish the technology to be 'future-proofed' so that any upgrade in speeds allowed within an upgraded USO will be possible within the technology invested in locally

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Of course broadband should be affordable. It should also be fair across the country and the tariff of superfast broadband should be nationally applied so that higher USO rates are not allowable

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Whilst not against the idea of a social tariff, if the costs are fixed nationally then remote & rural areas will not be disadvantaged. Essentially a USO is necessary to widen coverage and availability but a social tariff is the answer to a different problem. In our community survey residents did not see why they should be denied the same rates as all other parts of the country

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In remote & rural parts of Scotland transport and availability of local services is limited and so universal access to superfast broadband is even more urgent

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The proportion of the population choosing to be connected to superfast broadband will increase exponentially over time. Not to do so will result in those who choose this route to be disenfranchised from society

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In our parish in September 2015 Assynt Community Association undertook a comprehensive survey of our population. This showed that 79% of the respondents were interested in receiving a faster broadband service

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People living in remote & rural areas such as ours do not accept that they should wait any further than the full implementation of the USO before they too can be connected to the global community. It will be more expensive per connection to connect homes & businesses in remote & rural areas - this has to be accepted and the price paid or we will be building a two speed Britain

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We do not have a view on this

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There is a clear benefit to society where everyone has access to essential services. Also tourists and businesses will be able to view the whole country as a single and open market

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We do not accept that the interpretation of reasonableness could lead to those most vulnerable in society (ie those who live in remote and rural areas) should be denied a connection to the global community which everyone else in Britain will be fully participating in

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Our view is that we should have a variety of means open to us to connect to the internet. If this is done then existing commercial & community networks and initiatives should be treated equally with the USO

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This seems to work well with telephony and allows connections in the vast majority of remote & rural locations. We would accept that this is a fair way of interpreting reasonableness. However costs applied should be examined locally to ensure that they are not excessive. If they are consumers will be the ones who suffer as the USO will fail to deliver

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We would suggest that the telephony USO maximum cost of £3,400 and the standard charge of £130 are accepted and reviewed after a period of three years. It is very unlikely that alternative figures can be examined accurately. If the maximum cost is too low then consumers will suffer and the USO will fail to deliver

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Rather than simply considering a single consumer request, USP's should be expected, when approached by a single consumer, to survey the whole community to see if gains can be achieved per consumer by widening the uptake locally.

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The cost of implementing the USO should be spread over the whole of Britain and those most vulnerable should not be expected to pay more to be connected. Excess charges will deny access to the internet to those living in the most remote & rural communities which often have lower levels of disposable income and far higher transport costs.

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As we saw in our survey there is a high percentage who wish to access superfast broadband; however 37% were not willing to pay more than £30 per month for such a service. The key therefore is to make the service widespread and to keep the cost down. Then, lower per residence costs will be achieved.

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BT Openreach has been widely criticised of being unresponsive to local needs; therefore we would prefer a system where USP's have to tender to provide the USO in different areas of the country

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The imperative is for all areas of the UK to be equally served by the USO

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Those living in remote & rural areas believe that whether it is industry or government that subsidises the USO is irrelevant. What is important is that pricing of broadband delivery is consistent across the UK whether it is as the result of the USO or via commercially delivered services. Transparency is key for this process to work well

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Communication between all areas should be transparent. The current DSSB programme is very secretive to consumers and we believe that where it is open to consumer feedback the possibility of overbuild should be limited

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The broadband USO consumer rates should be no higher than the median rates applied across the whole country

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We believe that a short period of 2-3 years would be the minimum period before the speed

delivered and costs are reviewed . But it should be no more than 4-5 years - if it was the USO would be left behind by speeds seen elsewhere in the country and cost reductions achieved by the widespread introduction of mass market technology.