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Dear Alex,

Thank you for your email of 27 January on behalf of your constituent, Jim Wilson, Convenor of Hareshaw Community Council regarding the broadband connection of local residents.

Before addressing your constituents concerns, I should stress, for your constituents' information, that all regulation and legislative competence in the area of telecommunications is wholly reserved to UK Ministers and the UK Parliament under the provisions of the Scotland Act 1998. However, the clear absence of a UK-wide strategy for improving rural connectivity, and the threat that entire areas of Scotland would be left with no access to decent broadband, with all the consequent severe implications for economic development in those localities, has meant that the Scottish Government has had to step-in and take the lead in addressing poor coverage, using its own resources, given the economic importance of broadband in Scotland.

We are doing this through a range of activity. First, the Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband (DSSB) programme is delivering over £400 million of investment, provided by the Scottish Government and partners, to extend fibre broadband access to areas where the market would not otherwise go, and, to-date, more than 944,000 additional premises in Scotland now have access as a direct result – this has significantly exceeded our target of 840,000 premises.

In relation to your constituents' specific query concerning the recipients of Scottish Government funding, the contracts for the two DSSB regional projects – one covering the Highlands & Islands; the other covering the rest of Scotland – were awarded to BT plc, who designated Openreach as the delivery partner responsible for infrastructure deployment through the programme.

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As you will know, we have also made our commitment to extend superfast broadband access to 100% of premises in Scotland, regardless of remoteness or rurality – a commitment we will deliver in part through our £600 million Reaching 100% (R100) contracts. The Scottish Government is funding £579 million or 96.5% of the R100 contracts, with UK Ministers providing just 3.5% or £21 million, despite telecommunications being fully their responsibility and we continue to make the case to UK Ministers that their funding contribution must increase.

On 10 October 2019, I confirmed that BT plc were the successful bidder for the Central lot of the R100 procurement – which includes Hareshaw. In the Parliamentary Statement I made on 9 January 2020, I announced that the contract we have signed with BT – alongside greater than anticipated commercial build – will deliver to around 87% of the eligible premises in the Central lot. I was also delighted to announce that a significant amount of that build would be full-fibre, meaning those premises will be capable of accessing download speeds of up to 1 Gigabit (1,000 Megabits) per second.

As much of the technology delivered will go beyond our original commitment, this means the civil works will take time. We will, therefore, provide additional support to ensure that everyone can access superfast broadband services by the end of 2021 - delivered through a national demand-led voucher scheme funded by the Scottish Government.

The voucher scheme will launch later this year and will provide grants to broadband customers in non-domestic and domestic premises, offering support to access a range of technologies and suppliers. An online checker will be provided later this year, ensuring information on roll-out is available down to the premises level and this will enable customers to decide whether they need to apply for a voucher to ensure they can access a superfast service by the end of 2021, either as an interim solution, as they await roll out of full fibre, or as a longer term solution if their premises was not included in the R100 roll-out proposed by BT or a complementary commercial build.

While the Scottish Government is intervening to address poor broadband coverage throughout Scotland, the issue Mr. Wilson's details in relation to broadband service disruption is a commercial matter. As telecommunications is a matter reserved to UK Government Ministers in Westminster, unfortunately this means that Scottish Government cannot directly intervene on commercial issues such as those described, with responsibility for regulation of the industry ultimately falling upon Ofcom as the UK's telecoms regulator.

If the local residents affected are not satisfied with the response or action taken by their service provider with regards to their connection, Ofcom may be able to assist - whilst they do not deal with individual complaints, their website provides guidance on how best to pursue action, including the possibility of a complaint being referred to an Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) scheme. For more information on this, please visit <http://consumers.ofcom.org.uk/complain/phone-and-broadband-complaints/service-problems/>.

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They may also find it helpful to know that there is an automatic compensation scheme in place for cases such as this. More information can be found on Ofcom's website: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/media/media-releases/2019/money-back-broadband-landline-customers>

I trust this information proves useful to you and your constituent.

Kind regards



PAUL WHEELHOUSE

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