



Department for
Digital, Culture,
Media & Sport

Sarah Healey

Permanent Secretary
4th Floor, 100 Parliament St
London SW1A 2BQ
T: 020 7211 6256

permanent.secretary@dcms.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/dcms

Dame Meg Hillier MP
Chair of the Public Accounts Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

27th May 2022

Dear Chair,

RE: Shared Rural Network Programme

Thank you for your letter of 12 May about the Shared Rural Network (SRN) programme, in which you raised a number of potential additional risks to the programme. Please find below responses to each of the points raised in your letter.

1. The Extended Area Service element of the programme

The Department has put in place measures to ensure there is effective oversight of the Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) so that the requirements of SRN are delivered.

The four MNOs are signed up and committed to delivering their SRN coverage obligations, which are measured and enforced by Ofcom. All four MNOs have dedicated project teams and have senior oversight of their individual SRN projects.

BDUK has a grant agreement in place with Digital Mobile Spectrum Limited (DMSL) to manage the Total Not Spots (TNS) programme and complete the EAS sites as the Home Office makes them available to MNOs. There is governance and reporting in place which includes regular progress checkpoints, and a MNO delivery board chaired by DMSL.

BDUK delivers effective oversight of the MNOs' delivery, chairing the SRN Programme Board, which includes senior officials from BDUK, as well as stakeholders from other Government departments, including HM Treasury. BDUK also chairs the SRN Oversight Board which brings together MNOs, BDUK, Home Office and Ofcom. BDUK has also put in place an Independent Assessor to advise the SRN programme on the MNOs' delivery.



b. Supplier capacity

Supplier capacity is a key risk that is monitored and managed by MNOs, and monitored by DMSL, and by BDUK via reporting into our governance including the SRN Programme Board. At this stage our assessment is that the risk is within acceptable tolerances. However, this risk is continuously assessed because we recognise that this could change through the lifetime of the SRN programme.

c. Engagement with the Devolved Administrations

Engagement with the Devolved Administrations is a key part of the SRN programme. The BDUK programme team works closely with the Devolved Administrations, including through industry-led SRN working groups where the SRN programme is discussed with partners in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The level of engagement is increasing as the main government-funded element of the programme moves from the design to the delivery phase, particularly in Scotland where we are working with our delivery partner to ensure National Parks are suitably engaged so that planning for new SRN sites progresses smoothly once applications are submitted.

2. The use of equipment from high-risk vendors

The situation with high-risk vendors and any associated impacts on SRN delivery is being actively monitored by BDUK. In respect of the government-funded elements of the SRN programme (Total Not Spots and EAS Areas), the MNOs will be deploying new equipment on recently built masts so the MNOs can install equipment that is not from high-risk vendors.

In respect of the industry-funded elements of the programme (Partial Not Spots), the MNOs have assured BDUK that whilst the swap-out of high-risk vendor equipment is a challenging programme itself, they are effectively managing the risk that high-risk vendor equipment could have on the delivery of their coverage obligations for SRN. This risk is monitored through the SRN Oversight Board and the SRN Programme Board.

3. Delivery at pace

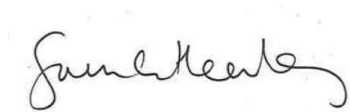
The reforms the government is making to the Electronic Communications Code, currently being taken through Parliament as part of the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill and expected to receive Royal Assent by the end of the year, should support the delivery of the SRN programme. They will provide a fast track process that will allow operators to deploy new networks in certain types of land at pace when landowners do not respond to repeated requests for access, encourage greater use of alternative dispute resolution, and clarify the process and framework for the renewal of expired agreements. In addition, the SRN programme should benefit from changes the government is making to planning laws in England. For example, the changes will allow greater increases to the widths and heights of existing masts without prior approval - a two-thirds increase for masts currently less than one metre in width, and a two metre increase for masts currently over one metre in width. The heights of existing ground-based masts can be increased without prior approval up to 25 metres on unprotected land.

4. Late publication of the summary AO assessment

Finally, the summary AO assessment should have been published in Summer 2021. I have taken action to ensure that the delay seen in this case is not repeated.

I hope you find this information useful and I look forward to the PAC recall session on 29 June where I would of course be happy to discuss these points in more detail with you and the Committee.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Sarah Healey', with a stylized, cursive script.

Sarah Healey
Permanent Secretary, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport