# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE**  | **Update on Digital Connectivity in Wales** |
| **DATE**  | **08 July 2022** |
| **BY**  | **Julie James MS, Minister for Climate Change**  |

The covid 19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated that digital connectivity is fundamental to the functioning and resilience of a modern society. As we emerge from the pandemic, new ways of working and living will continue to demand access to fast and reliable broadband and mobile services.

The responsibility for addressing telecommunications issues in Wales is not devolved to Welsh Ministers and rests firmly with the UK Government, the telecommunications industry and with Ofcom. We have repeatedly stepped in to improve digital connectivity where we can, leveraging funding from the EU and other sources to look after the interests of citizens and businesses in Wales. I want to provide an update to Members on our activity to improve broadband provision across Wales.

Firstly, I would like to give a brief update on our barrier busting taskforce. The taskforce, made up of representatives from the broadband and mobile industry, public sector bodies in Wales, the Welsh Government, and the regulator Ofcom, has focused on five key areas: planning, regulation, public assets, street works and communications. The five working groups we established to examine these issues have completed their work to identify barriers and to propose possible solutions to address those barriers. The taskforce board will meet in July to consider the working group findings and make recommendations to the Welsh Government. I intend to publish their recommendations when I receive them.

Secondly, our full-fibre roll-out with Openreach has been deploying gigabit capable broadband to homes and business over the last three years against a difficult backdrop of the pandemic and other challenges including securing agreement from landlords and landowners to deploy fibre on land and in buildings. To the end of March 2022, the project has delivered access to gigabit capable broadband to 29,959 premises that were included in the agreed roll-out. In addition to this, a further 4,382 premises have been addressed as a direct consequence of public funded roll out despite not being targeted by the project. The Welsh Government does not fund these consequential premises and so we warmly welcome their completion.

Given the challenges faced by the project we have now reached agreement with Openreach to extend the project to 31 March 2023 to ensure that as many premises as possible are able to benefit. The number of premises to be built to under the agreed roll-out is 37,137. While this is slightly lower than the anticipated 39,000 total premises, we recognise that a significant number of the premises de-scoped had already been given access to gigabit broadband under commercially led rollouts. In addition, we acknowledge that some premises had to be de-scoped where actual costs exceeded the modelled costs that Openreach had originally anticipated, and so could not be justified from a value for money perspective.

As with the rollout to date, we are very confident that the total number of premises to benefit from the project will actually be higher than 39,000 premises when the roll out closes in March 2023 through additional non-contracted, consequential premises providing additional benefit at no additional cost to the taxpayer. We currently anticipate that the total number of premises given access to gigabit broadband through this project is likely to be circa 40,000 premises.

Finally, I want to provide a brief update on the Access Broadband Cymru grant scheme. Following a recommendation by the National Infrastructure Commission for Wales following its work on digital infrastructure issues, we have conducted a review of the scheme. The review highlighted a number of recommendations which my officials are working through, and I hope to be able to say more shortly. However, one important change to the way the scheme operates will be implemented in the coming weeks. Applicants will soon be able to fill-out all of their details through an online application process rather than having to fill out an application form and then email it to the team. The new application process will make it easier and quicker to apply. I will update Members once the process is live.