

Mobile Update

from Russell George AM

20th November 2015

Dear All,

I would like to update you on issues regarding mobile phone coverage in Montgomeryshire.

Firstly, I would like to thank you for the influx of emails and calls that I and my office have received over the last few weeks regarding the lack of mobile signal across Montgomeryshire. As you may be aware, I invited all four network providers (EE, O2, Vodafone and Three) to meet with me in Newtown last week to discuss mobile coverage issues. I also invited a number of community leaders and representatives from all areas of Montgomeryshire to join me at the meeting.

The lack of mobile signal along with broadband has always been an issue for Montgomeryshire and rural Wales which is why, when I became an Assembly Member, I set up the National Assembly Cross Party Group on Digital Communications in an effort to bring together operators and other interested parties to improve the situation.

Some areas of Montgomeryshire have no mobile reception at all and in the Newtown area over recent months there has been a significant deterioration in mobile coverage which is primarily due to the fact that a number of masts have been decommissioned, and the remaining masts cannot cope with the demand for signal.

As a result of issues across mid Wales, I wanted to bring all four network operators and the regulator, Ofcom Wales, to Montgomeryshire so that they could hear directly from local people about the day to day difficulties which we all experience due to the lack of a good mobile signal.

I am pleased that the operators accepted my invitation and I thought that the meeting was mostly productive. Each operator recognised that there is a need to improve mobile coverage by at least providing additional capacity on their networks and they also confirmed that some parts of Montgomeryshire will soon receive 4G services. For example, there was a commitment from EE that all of Newtown will receive 4G during January 2016 which would also help improve the current capacity difficulties experienced. I will most certainly be reminding EE of this commitment in the new year. EE also agreed to investigate the specific problems in Newtown which became significantly worse 11 weeks ago.

There will always be challenges for rural areas in providing mobile coverage due to the lack of a dense population and the topography of the area, making it difficult to build and position masts for the best signal coverage for a particular area. The operators, however, have specific targets to meet. O2 confirmed that they have an obligation of providing 4G to a minimum of 95% of Wales by 2017 and are also looking at upgrading their 2G and 3G networks. EE have 19,000 masts across the UK and have rolled out 4G to 11,000 of them. Their commitment is to provide 4G to 85% of Wales by the end of this year and 95% of 3G by the end of the year. They are also looking at voice over WiFi but of course need fibre broadband to be in place in order to provide this service.

I was also pleased that some of the operators at least acknowledged the complaints of poor customer service which many of you and other residents have encountered. All four operators recognised that improvements are needed in the way in which future coverage issues are communicated to customers in a timely and efficient manner so that customers are aware of any likely issues. Operators confirmed that if customers experience problems, they should contact them in the first instance through their normal customer service channels, but if customers still weren't happy, then by all means email the operators and copy Ofcom Wales and myself into the email.

Ofcom also gave an update on the UK Government's MIP project (Mobile Infrastructure Project). Unfortunately, the anticipated 300 / 400 mobile not-spot sites which MIP was supposedly going to support is not going to be the case. In reality, only 30 sites have been identified, 9 of which are in Wales. This is very disappointing.

With regards to future coverage improvements, all operators were in agreement that, although they are in competition with one another for customers, they need to work together with other public bodies i.e. UK Government, Welsh Government and Local Authorities, to improve and build the future infrastructure needed.

Current planning policies are far too restrictive in order to meet customer demands and current regulations and barriers to planning need to change. There is also a need for customer, political and economic pressure to be applied to help push for improved coverage and service.

Ofcom has developed interactive mobile checker maps on their website and the link if you're interested is here <http://maps.ofcom.org.uk/>. The maps show current coverage by the network which is operating in that area and the information has been provided to Ofcom by the network operators. If you believe the maps are incorrect i.e. showing there is mobile coverage but in reality there is no coverage, then please contact Ofcom on 02920 467200 or email elinor.williams@ofcom.org.uk to inform them that the information is incorrect.

Ofcom Wales is very much about protecting the interests of the consumers in Wales and it has the ability to issue financial penalties to network operators if they do not adhere to regulations or are not putting customers at the forefront of their business.

You can be assured that our MP Glyn Davies and I will continue to lobby the UK Government and Welsh Government to re-examine areas which are no longer going forward as part of the MIP project. Partial not spots also need to be looked at and addressed as it is essential that we have access to good and reliable mobile and broadband services that are fit for the 21st Century.

I will also be keeping a close eye on future commitments made by the network operators and will support them in any discussions to build new infrastructure appropriate for the area.

In the meantime, please feel free to contact me or my office at any time if you think I can be of any help to you.

Kind regards

Russell George
Assembly Member for Montgomeryshire