



Department for Transport

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9 June 2023

Dear Charles,

During the recent Oral Question on Train Wi-Fi, I agreed to provide a written response to a point you raised in relation to the provision of Wi-Fi onboard trains and Project Gigabit.

I understand the value passengers place on Wi-Fi services; however, our railways are currently not financially sustainable, and it is unfair to continue to ask taxpayers for financial support when revenue and demand levels are still well below pre-pandemic level. Estimates from March 2023 showed that revenue numbers and passenger numbers were down by 13 per cent and 10 per cent respectively of pre-pandemic levels.

The Department and rail operators are very focused on increasing revenue, but we also need to control costs to reduce the burden on the taxpayer. Together, we have reshaped passenger services to better match the demand we see every day while supporting greater levels of weekend and leisure travel.

We have challenged the industry to find efficiencies through greater collaboration across track and train, and the industry must also consider what facilities customers most value. No decisions have yet been taken regarding the provision of passenger Wi-Fi on trains, with discussions held with the franchised train operators to examine options. The industry has estimated that, currently, between 10 percent and 20 per cent of people on trains use the Wi-Fi at some point during their journey, though many customers prefer to use 4G and 5G networks directly.

Project Gigabit is the Government's programme to provide homes and communities with access to gigabit-capable internet speeds. By 2025, the Government target is to have at least 85 per cent gigabit-capable broadband coverage, and to achieve 99 per cent as soon as possible thereafter. As of May 2023, 75.5 per cent of UK premises can now access gigabit-capable

broadband, this represents a huge leap forward from January 2019, when coverage was just 6 per cent.

Project Gigabit's focus is on providing fixed broadband connectivity, and therefore it is not relevant to the provision of onboard Wi-Fi, which requires one or more mobile operators' 4G or 5G data connections to be used and distributed by the train's onboard Wi-Fi equipment.

I am copying this letter to all Noble Lords who spoke in the debate, and will place a copy in the Library of the House. Thank you for raising this matter with me.

Yours,
Charlotte

BARONESS VERE OF NORBITON