

Lord Young of Norwood Green
Minister for Postal Affairs and
Employment Relations

The Lord Howard of Rising
House of Lords
London
SW1A 0PW

15th January 2010

Dear Lord Howard,

You will recall that during the Committee Stage of the Digital Economy Bill on 12 January we had an exchange about the resilience of the mobile phone network and I promised to write (Hansard: Col 408).

The essential point that needed clarification was whether Ofcom would be able to distinguish between system failure through overload or from some other cause. First let me say something about the resilience of the mobile networks generally. They are designed to allow some load sharing between cells so that the failure of one cell will not mean a total loss of coverage in that area. But, it is considered uneconomic to build in resilience to the loss of mains electrical power (unlike traditional fixed line networks that do have considerable resilience through back-up generation). Most cells have a small battery – not unlike a car battery – that provides around 40 minutes continued operation in the event of a power outage. This is designed to deal with short-term problems with local electrical loops and not to withstand a major power outage.

Neither do mobile networks have an infinite capacity for handling calls. I understand that calculations are made on the likely traffic that will arise from a certain area and the cell infrastructure is designed to meet the peak plus have some capacity in reserve. This is in the commercial interests of the companies and it is a long time since consumers experienced the frustrations of accessing a cell as a regular occurrence. The networks do take account of expected surges in certain locations and either build that into their planning or – as in the case of events such as Glastonbury – have mobile facilities to meet the demand.

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The system cannot, however, cope with New Year's Eve or unexpected surges such as 7/7. On that day, the mobile networks remained fully operational (apart from a few cells that were shut down on police advice) and carried an amount of traffic that exceeded the daily peak. But for some hours the networks were overloaded - especially in certain locations such as train stations - to several times the expected peak and some calls simply could not be carried.

The purpose of our legislation is to ensure that we have an understanding of what is happening in relation to resilience and whether the situation is getting better or worse. The example of the mobile networks demonstrates that it will be a challenge for Ofcom to find the right metrics to paint that picture. Clearly, they will not be monitoring networks in real time and the challenge will be to understand the factors behind the raw numbers on network availability and outages that will come from the operators. We do not have all the answers yet as the approach taken will clearly have to reflect discussions yet to take place with the operators on the sort of data that they can provide. I remain convinced that the approach we have taken towards resilience reporting is the right one in drawing the obligation widely and allowing the detail to be worked out in a collaborative way.

I am copying this letter to Lord Lucas as it touches on issues raised in his helpful intervention. I am also copying this letter to Lord Razzall for the Liberal Democrats and to the Earl of Errol and Baroness Young for the Crossbenchers and will arrange for a copy to be deposited in the Library of the House.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tony Young', written in a cursive style.

TONY YOUNG
LORD YOUNG OF NORWOOD GREEN