

VodafoneThree

SIGNAL FOR GROWTH

Why mobile coverage matters for UK entrepreneurship



Contents

Foreword	04
Executive summary	06
Policy context	08
Key findings	10
The importance of mobile connectivity for existing entrepreneurs	11
Mobile connectivity and young, prospective entrepreneurs	13
Economic and business impact	14
Conclusion	18
Methodology	19
Endnotes	21

About WPI Strategy

WPI Strategy is one of the UK's leading political communications consultancies, with a track record of delivering high impact public affairs campaigns. We offer senior strategic counsel to ensure that campaigns are underpinned by evidence-based content.

wpi-strategy.com

info@wpi-strategy.com

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About VodafoneThree

VodafoneThree is the UK's largest mobile network operator serving the fixed and mobile market, formed following the merger of Vodafone UK and Three UK in June 2025.

Through an unprecedented £11 billion investment, VodafoneThree will build the UK's best network. The network will deliver reliable, quality connectivity to all nations and regions, creating as many as 13,000 jobs and laying a digital foundation for the country's growth ambitions. VodafoneThree is the only mobile network operator with a fully funded, regulated and guaranteed network build plan, reaching 99% 5G Standalone population coverage by 2030 and 99.96% by 2034. From big cities to small towns, and everywhere in between, the company's mission is to build the UK's best network.

VodafoneThree is a private company, 51% owned by Vodafone and 49% owned by CK Hutchison Holdings. It encompasses all businesses and assets, including Vodafone UK, Three UK, VOXI Mobile, SMARTY and Talkmobile.

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Foreword

The UK is a world-leading centre for entrepreneurship.

Over the years, countless ambitious people have chosen to launch their businesses here, benefiting from a supportive environment that continues to make the UK one of the highest ranked countries in the world for attracting start-up talent.¹ It is no surprise that successive governments have attempted to make sure the UK remains a great place for people to start and run their own businesses, including small medium enterprises (SMEs), which make up 99.8% of the country's total business population.²

Most recently, the Labour government continued this trend by introducing a comprehensive strategy for SMEs, promising to “remove the barriers that have held back Britain's risk-takers for too long.”³ The plan highlighted familiar obstacles such as excessive bureaucracy, trade restrictions, difficulties in securing finance, and gaps in digital skills. Yet there are other barriers that need tackling too.

This new research from WPI Strategy, commissioned by VodafoneThree, lays out clearly how improving connectivity boosts business creation and how providing entrepreneurs with the best coverage possible could help create around 49,000 new businesses. Within a decade, these new companies could be generating as much as £6.6 billion for the UK economy every year, in additional gross value added (GVA).

Progress in improving connectivity is therefore a key component in the government's plan to make the UK the very best place in the world to start and grow a business. Strong mobile coverage paves the way for the entrepreneurs of today and tomorrow to do business anywhere, anytime.

VodafoneThree is addressing this head on through a regulated £11 billion commitment to build the UK's best network. We will reach 99% 5G Standalone (5G SA) population coverage by 2030, and 99.96% by 2034. This substantial investment aims to transform connectivity for businesses of all sizes in the UK, from new entrepreneurs to established SMEs and large businesses.

Around 28.6 million Vodafone and Three mobile customers have already started to benefit from automatic access to each other's networks – connecting them to the best available coverage, at no extra cost. From busy city centres to remote rural towns, VodafoneThree's network will ensure every aspiring and current entrepreneur has the mobile network access they need, regardless of where they are.



As a result of bringing the two networks together across the UK, VodafoneThree has already removed over 16,500 km² of not spots – areas where either the Vodafone or Three network previously had little or no mobile coverage. This means improved mobile connectivity to an area equivalent to 10x the size of London, providing more businesses with more reliable coverage. We achieved this by deploying ‘Multi Operator Core Network’ (MOCN) technology on more than 8,000 sites nationwide, enabling Vodafone and Three customers to connect to the best available coverage, at no extra cost. The impact of these improvements for consumers has already been recognised by Ofcom along with the pro-growth, economic benefits.⁴

Expanding high-quality mobile coverage is not simply a digital upgrade or a nice-to-have. In today’s digital economy, it is a must have, a pro-growth economic intervention. It not only creates new opportunities for established companies and their staff to do more business in former not spots. In such areas, it also provides a launching pad for new entrepreneurs to thrive.



Andrea Donà
Chief Network Officer



Executive summary

“Growth is this government’s number one mission and small and medium-sized businesses are the engine room. Your success is critical for delivering our Plan for Change. You are not just businesses – you are the nation’s dreamers and doers, innovators, the beating heart of communities, and the backbone of the economy.”⁵

These words from the government’s plan for small and medium-sized businesses, first published last year, outline how supporting small businesses, by tearing down barriers to growth, is a top priority.

SMEs, driven by entrepreneurs, make up 99.8% of UK businesses, employ 60% of the nation’s workforce and account for over half of the UK’s business turnover.⁶ New businesses are foundational to our wider economy, leading innovation, disruption and championing new ideas. But for entrepreneurs to thrive, they need the right environment. They need access to finance, low barriers to entry and exit, and infrastructure that lowers the fixed cost of doing business.

In the digital, AI age, another factor is becoming increasingly crucial: mobile connectivity, which enables business owners to operate and communicate wherever and whenever needed. Yet the importance of mobile connectivity for modern life, including for business, has historically been under researched, and its potential sometimes under appreciated.⁷

Recent research has begun to fill this gap. It shows how better mobile connectivity in the UK correlates with better health, education, employment and business growth outcomes.⁸ Separate analysis has also shown the potential of 5G SA technologies to accelerate economic growth, across UK regions and industrial sectors.

VodafoneThree is investing £11 billion in the UK’s telecommunication infrastructure. Vodafone and Three customers across the country are already starting to benefit from the removal of 16,500 km² of not spots and partial not spots – an immediate benefit of the merger approved last year.

This report seeks to understand how these improvements will support and encourage budding UK entrepreneurs to take the leap and start businesses of their own.

VodafoneThree commissioned WPI Strategy to conduct economic analysis to understand the significance of mobile connectivity to existing and potential entrepreneurs. The analysis built upon the findings of polling and a localised focus group conducted by Merlin Strategy.



The findings are clear. This research indicates mobile coverage has a significant impact on established entrepreneurs' ability to run existing businesses successfully – and on whether new entrepreneurs launch new businesses at all. It showcases the major economic benefits that could be unlocked if this untapped potential were realised through improved mobile connectivity.

Unlock tens of thousands of start-ups

Providing entrepreneurs with the best coverage possible could help create around 49,000 new businesses. Within a decade, these new companies could be generating as much as £6.6 billion for the UK economy every year, in additional gross value added (GVA).

Facilitate working on the move

More than three in four (76%) founders say being able to do business on their phone on the go is either critical or very important. More than two in three (67%) say secure, always-on connectivity is similarly important.

Fulfil young people's potential through entrepreneurship

18 to 24-year-olds were found to have the highest levels of entrepreneurial intent, with 51% of those polled saying they had seriously considered setting up their own business. 24 to 35-year-olds came in a close second with 47%, markedly higher than the 39% national average.

Support local economies in every region

London, with easy access to capital, a diverse talent pool and a large customer base, was unsurprisingly found to have the highest level of overarching entrepreneurial intent with 50% of those polled saying they have seriously considered setting up their own business. Reflecting the importance of adequate infrastructure, more than two in three current business owners (68%) say that better connectivity in their area was one of the most significant elements that enabled them to set up a business in the local area. 26% of aspiring business owners say that better mobile connectivity would directly increase their likelihood of setting up a company.

Policy context

Unlike fixed broadband, which helps businesses connect in stationary places, mobile coverage supports businesses to operate on the move. Mobile connectivity supports entrepreneurship that is time sensitive, customer facing and location independent, enabling firms to trade, communicate, manage logistics and accept payments.

Mobile networks aren't just a supplement in rural areas; they are often the only reliable way to stay connected. This makes consistent coverage essential for any business with a wide geographical footprint. As the economy becomes more mobile, platform based and service oriented, strong mobile connectivity has become an essential pillar of Britain's business infrastructure - particularly for sole traders, SMEs and early-stage firms.

How improved mobile coverage supports entrepreneurship in practice



Improved mobile connectivity helps new businesses to launch and innovate in multiple ways:

- Lowering barriers to entry, reducing start-up costs and enabling mobile-first and cloud-based business models.
- Allowing firms across the UK to tap into markets beyond their immediate area.
- Facilitating better information and decision making, through real time access to prices, demand conditions, mapping and customer communications.
- Making businesses more adaptable and resilient, support mobile working, continuity of operations and respond to market changes.
- Unlocking faster innovation and experimentation, allowing entrepreneurs to test, refine and scale products and services more quickly.

These effects are particularly relevant for early-stage firms, which are more sensitive to upfront costs, uncertainty and delays, as well as for businesses operating outside major urban centres.

What the evidence shows

Most research on the links between connectivity and entrepreneurship in the UK focuses on fixed broadband, likely due to its greater availability of data. Yet the limited available evidence found on mobile coverage shows a positive correlation between reliable connectivity and entrepreneurship.

A 2018 literature review commissioned by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), as it was then named, concluded that the available evidence points to meaningful economic benefits from mobile connectivity.⁹ This includes time savings for businesses, improved efficiency and stronger growth outcomes. The mobile-specific causal studies are fewer than for fixed broadband and methodological approaches vary, but results are generally robust across different measures of coverage and speed.

A more recent piece of research commissioned by the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) investigated the relationship between the number of available mobile networks in an area and the associated benefits of mobile connectivity, paying particular attention to rural areas.

Amongst other things, the research found that rural communities who are given reliable mobile connectivity experience higher levels of entrepreneurship, with local businesses undergoing tangible improvements in their daily operations, like better communication, data sharing, and broader access to markets.¹⁰

Research and analysis by Ofcom also highlight the importance of mobile connectivity for SMEs and sole traders, particularly for managing customers, payments and logistics.¹¹ These are precisely the activities most relevant to business formation and early-stage growth.

This is strongly supported by international evidence. Across multiple countries, research indicates that more available mobile broadband leads to higher rates of early-stage entrepreneurship, as measured by participation in nascent or young firms.¹²

Studies at the firm-level show that mobile network expansion improves business performance, formalisation and labour-market participation. This is particularly evident where connectivity meaningfully reduces isolation from markets.⁷ While contexts differ, the consistency of these findings reinforces the economic logic that improved mobile coverage supports the conditions under which new businesses form and grow.

Overall, more UK and entrepreneurship-focused research would help establish the link between mobile connectivity and entrepreneurship. With that in mind, this research set out to quantify the scale, impact and potential of mobile connectivity on new start-ups across the UK.

Key findings

This report's economic analysis and polling illustrate the significant impact of mobile connectivity on entrepreneurship in the UK.

First, this research polled a representative population sample with questions such as whether mobile connectivity in their area was holding them back from starting a company. The results of this poll were combined with past studies' findings on the likelihood of individuals starting their own business, varying by age and region.¹³

These findings were then integrated with population and wider economic data from the Office for National Statistics. This ensured that the analysis would estimate the actual number of new businesses that could be created if the connectivity barrier were removed, and their actual economic output in subsequent years. To project what mobile coverage can mean for start-ups in every corner of the UK, this data was broken down by nation, region and even local authority.

To better understand the real-life economic impact of mobile coverage, the research was supplemented by a focus group where researchers spoke to current and aspiring entrepreneurs about their experiences in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire. The focus group illustrated some of the ways in which mobile connectivity can hold back current and aspiring entrepreneurs. Newcastle-under-Lyme was chosen as a case study town because it has a relatively low number of SMEs but relatively high number of young people. Polling data indicates young people are particularly likely to say they want to start their own business, so the area arguably has significant untapped potential for entrepreneurship.

The importance of mobile connectivity for existing entrepreneurs

Becoming an entrepreneur and running a business is challenging. On average, only 10% of new businesses manage to survive longer than 10 years.¹⁴

This research highlights the key role played by the level of mobile connectivity available in an aspiring entrepreneur's local area. According to this report's new polling, over 25% of those who would consider starting a business said that better mobile connectivity in their local area would increase their chances of actually doing so.

More established entrepreneurs highlighted how vital connectivity remains for them, too. More than 75% of founders said being able to connect with their business on-the-go through their phone as either "critical" or "very important". Most highlighted the wider importance of secure, always-on connectivity for their business, with almost half (45%) saying it was "very important", and another quarter calling it "critical".

This is because modern day entrepreneurs carry out mobile connectivity-powered activities on a daily basis. Almost two in three founders said their business frequently uses connectivity-enabled tools, such as processing contactless payments through smartphone-connected card readers.



Focus group insights

A focus group was held in Newcastle-under-Lyme with existing and prospective business owners. Newcastle-under-Lyme was selected as a region with a high proportion of young people, found in the polling to be the most entrepreneurial, but a relatively low number of new business creations. This research sought to explore further why this was the case.



Reliable mobile coverage for on-site communications

One former landscaping business owner shared his experience of working on a site with variable mobile connectivity coverage. A common challenge for him was not being able to communicate sufficiently with project supervisors and suppliers on site. He said the lack of reliable, widespread coverage on his mobile phone had contributed to critical decisions on his projects being delayed. He was “unable to coordinate, and that used to become a major, major issue”. Workers had to be sent off-site every hour just to find a reliable signal and check messages.



Mobile connectivity to have a direct line with clients

Another business owner who operates in the recruitment industry, said that having mobile connectivity was essential to running her firm, “My phone is my business, so to speak.” Poor connectivity on her phone would “make life challenging” and it would often lead to her inability to complete essential business functions, such as having a direct line of communication with her customers at all times.

Overall, the poll findings and focus group make clear the key role mobile connectivity plays in enabling individuals to run varied businesses day to day - from contactless payments to replying to emails on the go.

Mobile connectivity and young, prospective entrepreneurs

For younger generations, becoming an entrepreneur is becoming an increasingly attractive prospect.¹⁵ Approximately half of under-35s polled said they had seriously considered setting up a business, with entrepreneurial ambition highest among 18 to 24-year-olds (51%), followed by 24 to 35-year-olds (47%). Yet only half of respondents who have seriously considered launching their own firms said that their local area provided the right conditions to start one.

Age group	Percentage of respondents who say they are serious about starting a business
18-24	51%
25-34	47%
35-44	46%
45-54	32%
55-64	23%
65+	24%

Many aspiring entrepreneurs are forced to leave the area they call home to establish a business because their current environment does not offer the right support or conditions.

The growth of digital businesses means that reliable connectivity - enabling communication with clients via online platforms, customer management tools and direct channels - is now a significant factor in how feasible it is to launch a start-up in their local area.

The poll found that mobile connectivity plays into this dynamic. It emerged that over one in three aspiring entrepreneurs believed better mobile connectivity in their area would make it more suitable for setting up a company.

Similarly, over 60% said that if they had better mobile connectivity in their local area, they would be more likely to have started a business already.



Reliable connectivity for sharing large files

As part of the focus group, a young university student from Newcastle-under-Lyme who is trying to start a small business in social media marketing shared his story. He said he had once lost a project due to unreliable mobile connectivity during a car journey. The young prospective entrepreneur explained that he was unable to send a video to a potential client on time, because while he was on the go, his mobile signal was too weak to upload the large file successfully. This resulted in his client selecting a competitor's video for their project, potentially affecting his ability to establish his initial customer base.

Some sectors, like social media marketing, require business owners to share large files quickly, often while travelling or while on a commute. A strong, reliable mobile connection is essential for these businesses to operate.

As we can see from the polling and Newcastle-under-Lyme focus group, mobile connectivity is clearly an important factor in helping people develop businesses in their local area and enabling them to take their enterprise further afield.

Economic and business impact

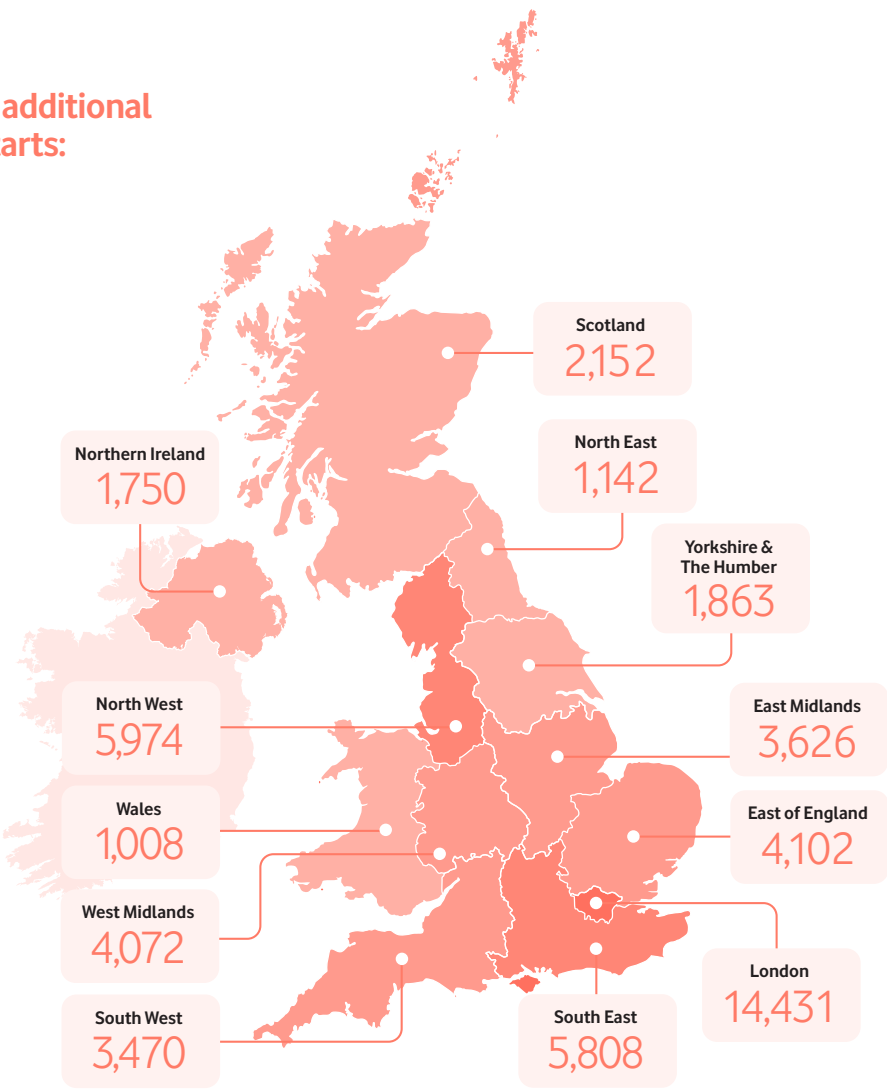
The regional polling was able to forecast how improved mobile connectivity would help people start new businesses across the UK.

Based on responses to the statement, 'If I'd had better mobile connectivity in my area, I'd have been more likely to start a business,' a multiplier was added to estimate how many respondents would realistically start a business. This revealed several narratives.

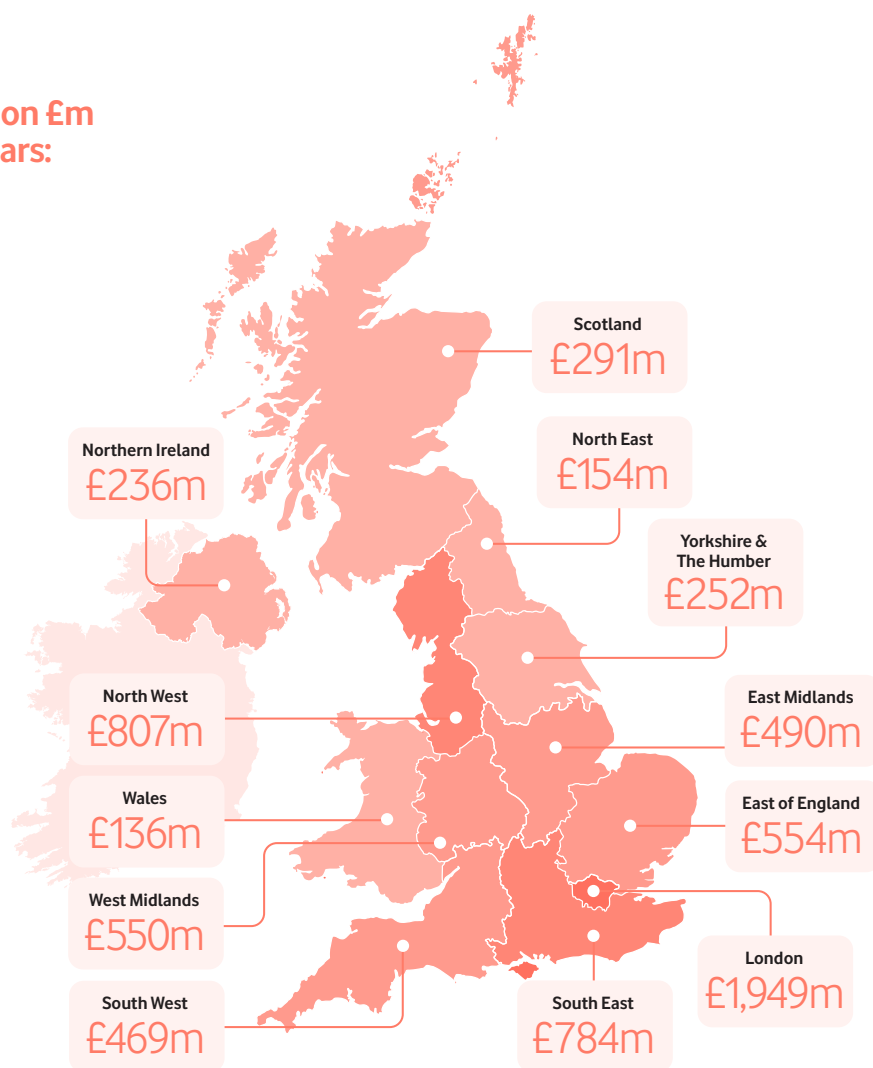
Regions	Percentage of respondents who say they are serious about starting a business
East Midlands	30%
East of England	35%
London	50%
North East	37%
North West	42%
Northern Ireland	41%
Scotland	38%
South East	30%
South West	31%
Wales	32%
West Midlands	38%
Yorkshire & Humberside	27%
UK Total	39%

Regions	Percentage of poll respondents who strongly agree that mobile connectivity is holding them back from starting a business	Potential New Business Births Expected potential businesses operating after	10 years Annual GVA generated	10 years from now by businesses established today (£m)
North East	13%	1,142	114	154
North West	19%	5,974	597	807
Yorkshire and The Humber	8%	1,863	186	252
East Midlands	17%	3,626	363	490
West Midlands	16%	4,072	407	550
East of England	13%	4,102	410	554
London	22%	14,431	1,443	1,949
South East	12%	5,808	581	784
South West	12%	3,470	347	469
Wales	8%	1,008	101	136
Scotland	10%	2,152	215	291
Northern Ireland	18%	1,750	175	236
UK Total		49,399	4,940	6,672

Number of additional business starts:



GVA Addition £m Over 10 Years:



The findings indicates clearly that better connectivity could boost entrepreneurship not only nationally, but in every single nation and region of the UK. For each nation and region, between a quarter and half of respondents said they were serious about starting a business, even after excluding those who had already started companies.

Yet every area saw at least one in 13 respondents say that mobile connectivity was holding them back. In some areas, this rose to more than one in five, with the greatest number in the East Midlands, Northern Ireland, the North West and London.

The research suggests that every nation and region could each benefit from at least 1,100 new startups, if better connectivity unlocked this constrained potential. This rises to at least 3,400 starts up in the majority of nations and regions. Nationally we estimate it would help create almost 50,000 new businesses.

Even after accounting for both the likelihood of respondents actually realising their ambitions, and typical survival rates for new businesses, the analysis estimates that the UK economy would benefit by as much as £6.6 billion a year in additional GVA nationwide from those startups still thriving a decade later.

Stronger, more dependable coverage would significantly benefit entrepreneurs and the economy not only nationally, but also in parts of the UK with smaller local economies. The North East, which had the lowest GDP per head in 2023, would see a £154 million boost annually in GVA a decade later. Northern Ireland, which had the lowest GDP overall, also had the third highest number of respondents report that connectivity was holding them back. It would see £236 million in additional GVA every year.

There are significant benefits to be realised even in regions which already have stronger local economies or stronger connectivity, too. The areas likely to see the most new businesses created would be the South East (5,808), North West (5,974) and London (14,431), the three regions with the highest GDP in 2023.

This is likely to reflect not only higher population rates in these areas, but also the higher rates of entrepreneurial ambition stated by respondents in London and the North West. Some 50% of respondents in the capital who had not already started a business said they were serious about doing so, almost twice the proportion in the lowest region.



Conclusion

The findings in this report demonstrate how stronger, more dependable mobile coverage could transform otherwise unsupportive local business environments into ones that encourages entrepreneurship.

Contributing towards removing not spots has the potential to extend the best of Britain's vibrant start-up culture across every part of the UK, helping to create tens of thousands of new businesses in the years to come.

Across polling, analysis and focus group insights, there remains a strong and significant entrepreneurial spirit across the UK. But for too long in too many parts of the country, its potential has not been fully realised. Through VodafoneThree's continued effort to improve mobile connectivity, we hope to ensure that today and tomorrow's business owners can have the right environment to thrive.

The Government also has a role to play by removing barriers to growth across the planning system and allowing further liberalisation of net neutrality regulations to foster innovation in the telecommunications industry.

As recognised by Ofcom, any further improvements and investment in mobile connectivity should be achieved through a coordinated effort between government, industry and regulators.⁴ We look forward to working together and supporting our aim to deliver a world class, reliable network to every corner of the UK.

To learn more about how VodafoneThree is building the UK's best network, visit vodafonehree.com.



Methodology

The research estimates the potential Gross Value Added (GVA) associated with entrepreneurial activity and business creation currently being held back as a result of poor mobile connectivity. A nationally representative survey of 2,000 UK residents (aged 18+) was conducted to measure entrepreneurial intention linked to mobile connectivity constraints.

Among a range of survey questions, responses to the following statement were used as a core analytical input: “If I had had better mobile connectivity in my area, I would have been more likely to start a business.” Respondents who selected “strongly agree” with the above statement were used to derive regionally disaggregated estimates of latent entrepreneurial intent associated with mobile connectivity limitations.

Survey based estimates were adjusted to reflect the gap between expressed entrepreneurial intention and observed business creation rates. Evidence from the Federation of Small Businesses¹⁶ and the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor¹⁷ informed an assumption that only 12% of individuals who say they want to start a business, go on to do so.

Economic modelling approach

Adjusted survey results were combined with official data from the Office for National Statistics and NOMIS to estimate the potential economic impact of improved mobile connectivity on business creation.

The modelling incorporated the following datasets:

- Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES) data to estimate employment by Local Authority District
- Small-area GVA estimates to quantify local economic output
- UK Business Counts, segmented by industry and employment size band

In the initial modelling stage, the estimated uplift in prospective business formation derived from the survey was applied to ONS baseline business counts and employment. This produced an estimate of the implied impact on business creation, employment, and GVA under improved mobile connectivity conditions.

The estimated uplift in enterprise formation was then applied to observed business survival rates at the local authority level.

Headline results showcase the potential additional annual GVA generated ten years from now by businesses established because of improved mobile connectivity. This metric accounts for the timeframe of business formation, and the survival profile of newly established firms.

Table 1

Regions	Percentage of respondents who say they are serious about starting a business
East Midlands	30%
East of England	35%
London	50%
North East	37%
North West	42%
Northern Ireland	41%
Scotland	38%
South East	30%
South West	31%
Wales	32%
West Midlands	38%
Yorkshire & Humberside	27%
UK Total	39%

Table 2

Regions	Percentage of poll respondents who strongly agree that mobile connectivity is holding them back from starting a business	Adjusted percentage of people who may start a business if mobile internet connectivity was improved
North East	13%	1.0%
North West	19%	1.5%
Yorkshire and The Humber	8%	0.7%
East Midlands	17%	1.3%
West Midlands	16%	1.3%
East of England	13%	1.0%
London	22%	1.8%
South East	12%	1.0%
South West	12%	1.0%
Wales	8%	0.6%
Scotland	10%	0.8%
Northern Ireland	18%	1.5%

Table 3

Regions	Percentage of poll respondents who strongly agree that mobile connectivity is holding them back from starting a business	Potential New Business Births Expected potential businesses operating after	10 years Annual GVA generated	10 years from now by businesses established today (£m)
North East	13%	1,142	114	154
North West	19%	5,974	597	807
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UK Total		49,399	4,940	6,672

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WPI Strategy Limited, 1st Floor, 5-6 St Matthew Street, London, SW1P 2JT

WPI Strategy

wpi-strategy.com

WPI Strategy Limited, registered address 28 Church Road, Stanmore, Middlesex, England, HA7 4XR, is registered as a limited company in England and Wales under company number 10086986.

