

Broadband, Mobile and the Digital Divide

Purpose

For information

Summary

Following the visit of Sharon White, Chief Executive of Ofcom, to the Board this report updates members on the actions officers are undertaking following the meeting, outlines the next steps of the Up to Speed Campaign, and summarises officers' progress on the Digital Economy Bill as it passes through the House of Lords.

Recommendation

That the People and Places Board note update.

Action

Officers to take forward as directed by members.

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Introduction

1. Following the visit of Sharon White, Chief Executive of Ofcom, to the Board this report updates members on the actions officers are undertaking following the meeting, outlines the next steps of the Up to Speed Campaign, and summarises officers' progress on the Digital Economy Bill as it passes through the House of Lords.

Ofcom

2. Members engaged in a wide ranging discussion with Ms White at the last Board. The following actions were agreed with lead members and are currently ongoing:

2.1 Officers have invited members of the Board to share their local connectivity issues for collation via [an online form](#)¹. Officers will use this information to inform conversations with Openreach and provide Ofcom with an overview of the issues councils face.²

2.2 At present officers are working to set up a meeting between Lord Porter, Cllr Mark Hawthorne and the new independent chair of Openreach Mike McTighe. Following the meeting, officers will explore the best way for the Board to engage with Mr McTighe and his new independent board, to understand how BT's proposed separation will improve customer service and tackle issues such as those outlined by councils in our survey.

2.3 Regarding inaccurate "up to" speed ads, officers will engage with the Advertising Standards Agency, which is currently reviewing broadband speed advertising regulation, to understand its next steps and how accuracy will be improved, especially for connections in rural areas.

2.4 Officers will explore the feasibility of whether Ofcom fines imposed on mobile operator for poor coverage could be pumped back into mobile connectivity (rather than fed back into the Treasury).

2.5 LGA officers will invite Ms White back to the Board at an appropriate point to reflect on the progress of Ofcom's planned activity.

Update of Up to Speed Campaign

3. Following steer from lead members, officers will update the lguptospeed.org.uk campaign website to reflect LGA lobbying lines on the broadband universal service

¹ To request a hardcopy of this form please email daniel.shamplin-hall@local.gov.uk.

² Ofcom made clear at the last Board they wish to hear more from members about local connectivity issues. However, they do not have powers to investigate individual matters. Nonetheless, members may feel it important to share such matters with the telecommunications regulator to help steer their future policy decisions.

- obligation (USO) in preparation for the upcoming Government consultation on the measure as well as to raise mobile connectivity as a priority.
4. It is proposed that two themed sections will cover 'broadband and the USO' and 'mobile connectivity.' Each will include case studies and 'plain English explainer' pages to offer simple guidance on the subjects including the basics of superfast broadband, what residents can expect from the USO and how councillors can respond to the Government consultation. A 'Spread the word' page will be included in each section containing a communications pack with editable press releases, tweets, Twitter images, posters and other marketing collateral for councillors to promote the campaign in their own areas.
 5. The speed test will remain on the front page to encourage both councillors and residents to take the test but there is scope to also include a map of where speed tests have been taken. We propose that councillors will be able to email their speed test results and their thoughts on how broadband speeds affect them, their ward and their council for potential future case studies or inclusion on the site. On the pages dedicated to information on mobile connectivity, we are exploring how we can develop our work with Ofcom to signpost or host a mobile connectivity checker for users of the site. The Board might wish to receive a presentation on the work of the campaign to date at the next Board.

Digital Economy Bill

6. The Digital Economy Bill has now passed to the House of Lords Report Stage. Officers have worked with opposition peers to table a range of amendments. At the time of writing, the progress of LGA-supported amendments is as follows:
 - 6.1 An amendment seeking the establishment of a USO social tariff in the primary legislation was withdrawn. However, in response to the amendment the Minister confirmed that the Government are sympathetic to the need for a social tariff.
 - 6.2 An amendment requiring Ofcom's reporting on the USO to be presented to Parliament was not moved. The Minister gave a number of reasons for this including reporting requirements should be set out once the design of the USO has been finalised.
 - 6.3 An amendment to ensure the USO specifies minimum download and upload speeds, tabled by a combination of Labour and Lib Dem peers, was pushed to a vote by Labour peers. The amendment passed, meaning the Government will have to put some of this on the face of the Bill. The LGA supported the intention behind this amendment, but have said specifications on download and upload speeds should be in secondary legislation in order that they can be reviewed and updated more often than having to amend primary legislation would allow.

A New Government Digital Strategy

7. At the time of writing the Government has announced it will launch a new Digital Strategy. Officers can update members in more detail at the Board on the contents of the Strategy after its publication. So far, it is understood there will be a specific focus on digital skills. This follows the Government's recent announcement that basic digital skills training will be offered free of charge to adults in England who need it. The Government's commitment to upskill people with basic digital skills

9 March 2017

training is a step in the right direction, and one which we welcome. However, it has been made clear that all new training will have to be funded through the £1.5 billion a year Adult Education Budget across England. The AEB is already the result of three reduced and consolidated funds and is being progressively devolved to combined authorities. The budget for this was set prior to the recent skills announcement so it is not yet clear what further analysis has been done to qualify how free training for all will increase the entitlements element of AEB. Nor are we clear if it will fully fund Level 2 training for 19-23 year olds.

8. Officers are working with LGA parliamentary stakeholders to table an amendment calling for Government to fund the digital skills qualification appropriately by providing a financial impact assessment of the additional qualification and putting in place a comprehensive and sustainable funding solution.