

## The Rural Digital Connectivity Working Group Update

### Purpose of report

For information.

### Summary

This paper outlines the priorities and planned activity of the Rural Digital Connectivity Working Group and updates members on its work to date.

### Recommendations

Members are invited to **note**:

1. Recent progress against the priorities agreed by the Rural Digital Connectivity Working Group (**paragraph 4**).
2. That members will receive an update on this work at the first Board of the next political cycle in September and have the opportunity to review current working arrangements in accordance with the Working Group's Terms of Reference (**paragraph 5**).

### Action

Subject to member comment, ADEPT and LGA officers will continue to support the Rural Digital Connectivity Working Group on meeting its outlined priorities.

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## **The Rural Digital Connectivity Working Group Update**

### **Background**

1. The People and Places Board has led the Local Government Association's work on digital connectivity and helped establish local government as a credible and respected voice in the field. While members were keen to build on this position, the wide-ranging scope of the Board's current work programme and the limited capacity of LGA officers led the Board to establish a Working Group to allow members to continue to contribute to the LGA's work on digital connectivity within these constraints.
2. In order to secure extra officer capacity, it was agreed that the Working Group would be supported by an Officers' Group led by the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT).
3. This paper sets out the agreed priorities of the Rural Digital Connectivity Working Group and updates members on the work undertaken to date in support of these priorities.

### **The focus and recent activity of the Rural Digital Connectivity Working Group**

4. The Working Group's Terms of Reference give it full discretion to determine its remit within the framework of the Board's key priorities on digital connectivity. In line with this steer the Group has undertaken the following work since its inception:
  - 4.1. **Lobbying for better fixed line broadband connectivity for rural residents:** at the time of writing, the Working Group are due to meet Ofcom officials to discuss a range of issues related to digital connectivity including the Broadband USO. Officers will update members on these conversations at the Board.
  - 4.2. **Ensuring fast and reliable digital connectivity is provided to new builds:** officers have conducted an assessment of the current connectivity provided to new builds, in partnership with ThinkBroadband.com. This found that one in five rural homes built in the last three years is still not connected to superfast broadband and one in 10 is unable to achieve the USO minimum speeds. Following this assessment, officers have held early conversations with Government, broadband providers and the British Standards Institute to explore the potential of developing a digital connectivity Kitemark to make it clear to the public whether or not their new home will have a fully future-proofed internet connection. The conversations are expected to progress over the summer and members will be updated on progress at the next Board in the autumn.
  - 4.3. **Lobbying for ubiquitous 4G coverage in non-metropolitan areas:** officers submitted to the recent Ofcom consultation on a new set of mobile coverage obligations it plans to place on mobile operators who purchase the newly released

700Mhz spectrum (i.e. the old frequency used by digital terrestrial TV which has been cleared for mobile use.)<sup>1</sup>

4.3.1. The LGA submission recommended that:

4.3.1.1. the 700Mhz spectrum presents Ofcom with an opportunity to be more ambitious with its coverage obligations. At the very least, Ofcom's proposed obligations requiring mobile operators to cover 92 per cent of UK landmass by 2022 should be brought in line with the Government's pledge to extend mobile coverage to 95 per cent of the UK landmass by the same date.

4.3.1.2. Ofcom should adopt a sub-regional model of coverage obligation, which requires operators to achieve an agreed level of coverage over a local area, similar to the approach adopted by Government for the Superfast Broadband Programme, to ensure greater fairness in coverage levels across the country.

4.3.1.3. mobile operators should be encouraged to share their roll out plans with councils up to six months before submitting an application in order to give councils the time to consider what policy or practical interventions they can make to support greater expansion of mobile connectivity in their local area.

### **Upcoming activity and the future of the Working Group**

5. With the ADEPT Officers' Group formally established, there is now more capacity available to progress the Working Group's priorities at a faster pace over the coming months. It is suggested officers update members at the September Board on progress that has been made over the summer. The first Board of the political cycle will also provide Board members with the opportunity to review and amend the current working arrangements if necessary as outlined in the Working Group's Terms of Reference.

### **Next steps**

6. **Members will receive an update on this work at the first Board of the next political cycle in September and have the opportunity to review current working arrangements in accordance with the Working Group's Terms of Reference.**

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<sup>1</sup> The 700Mhz spectrum is an important part of securing better mobile connectivity for rural residents as its characteristics support better coverage across wider areas. The obligations that Ofcom place on purchasing a licence to use the 700Mhz spectrum will determine how far the purchasing mobile operators must extend their coverage.