

Rural Digital Connectivity

Purpose of report

For direction.

Summary

This paper provides members with an update on the national digital connectivity policy context, proposes a set of strategic priorities for the Board to pursue over the coming political cycle and asks members to steer officers on the proposed working arrangements for taking forward the digital connectivity agenda.

Recommendations

Members are invited to:

1. **Note** the current national policy context as outlined in paragraphs 6 - 13
2. **Comment** on proposals for a Shared Rural Network in paragraph 14 - 21
3. **Direct** officers on whether they wish to consider digital connectivity as part of the Board's core agenda as outlined in paragraphs 22 - 26
4. **Comment** on the proposed priorities for the Board to pursue over the coming political cycle as outlined in paragraphs 27-28.

Action

1. Officers will proceed as directed by members.

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Rural Digital Connectivity

Background

1. For businesses and residents to prosper in the digital age they need access to fast and reliable digital connectivity at home, at work and while on the move. Councils have a vital role to play in helping extend digital connectivity and this is particularly important in rural areas where connectivity is often poor.
2. The People and Places Board has been at the centre of the LGA's policy work in this area over the last four years. It has represented the views of rural residents and businesses in meetings with Ministers, Government officials, broadband providers and the communications regulator Ofcom. As such, the Board is now seen as an important national stakeholder and a credible voice with the press and wider media.
3. At the final Board of the 2018/19 political cycle, members made clear they wished to continue to build on this position and continue their work to improve digital connectivity for rural and coastal businesses and residents.
4. With this in mind, this paper provides members with an update on the national digital connectivity policy context, brings to their attention the implications of recent proposals from mobile network operators (MNOs) to build a 'Shared Rural Network', proposes a set of strategic priorities for the Board to pursue over the coming political cycle and asks members to comment on the proposed working arrangements for taking forward the digital connectivity agenda.
5. By way of additional background, the LGA's Councillors' Guide to Digital Connectivity is attached at **Appendix A**, providing further background on key technical terms and the national context. It is due to be published imminently.

The National Policy Context

Broadband

6. Local government has played a significant role helping extend 'superfast' connectivity (download speeds of at least 24Mbps) to 95 per cent of premises across the UK by leading and investing over £740 million pounds in the Superfast Broadband Programme. However, at present Ofcom statistics show only around 76 per cent of rural premises have what it considers superfast connectivity.¹
7. For the 11 per cent of rural premises in England that cannot access a broadband connection of 10Mbps download and 1Mbps upload – the Government has introduced a broadband universal service obligation. From 2020, this will allow residents to request that the universal service provider, in this instance Openreach, connects their property to

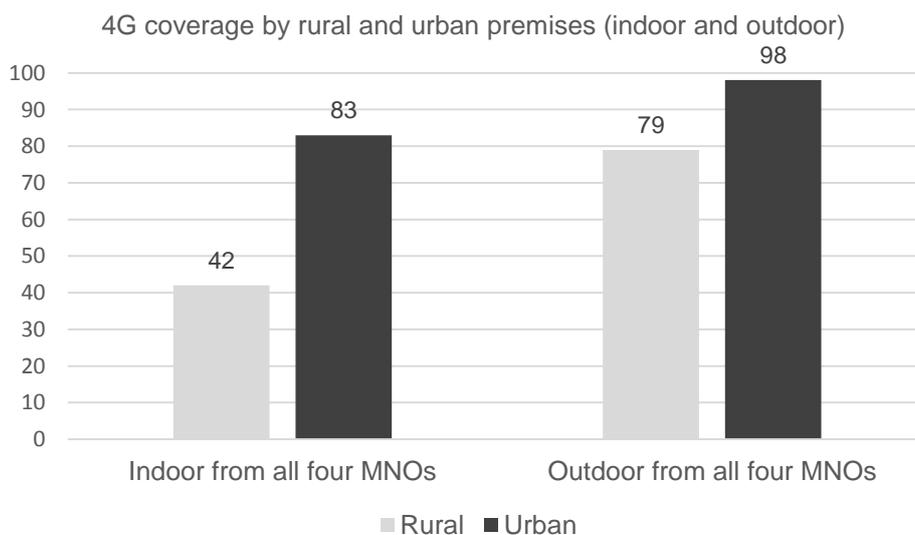
¹ Ofcom defines a superfast connection as 30Mbps download speed and 10Mbps upload speed. This differs from the Superfast Broadband Programme's 24Mbps download speed definition.

improved speeds (of at least 10Mbps download and 1Mbps upload) up to an installation cost of £3,600 (with any further cost covered by the resident).

8. The national policy direction on broadband has continued to evolve over the last year. In its Future Telecoms Infrastructure Review the previous Government committed to adopting an “outside-in” approach for all future digital connectivity funding, ensuring the hardest to reach areas would be served first.
9. More recently, the Prime Minister committed to rolling out full fibre connectivity to all premises by 2025, bringing forward the previous government target by eight years. While this proposal has potential to radically reshape digital connectivity across the country, it should be noted that such a target represents an extremely ambitious proposition.
10. Broadband providers have been quick to point out that a range of reforms will be needed to meet the target; from flexibilities on skilled migration to ensure there are enough people trained in fibre deployment, to national business rate relief on digital infrastructure and reforms to local wayleave, planning and roadworks policy.² As part of the LGA’s engagement with new Ministers, LGA Chairman Cllr James Jamieson has written to the Minister for Digital and Broadband, Matt Warman MP on behalf of the Board to ask for a meeting to understand the new Government’s intentions in this area.

Mobile connectivity

11. Members will be aware of the significant mobile connectivity digital divide that exists between urban and rural areas. Whilst the Government often cites national mobile coverage figures as a positive reflection of the country’s connectivity, they represent aggregates of coverage from one or two providers spread over different areas. Residents and businesses will only experience consistent fast and reliable mobile connectivity if there is excellent coverage from all four operators across the country.



² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-49209013>

12. Providing universal mobile connectivity coverage for all is both a technical and financial challenge. Ofcom’s own analysis shows a direct correlation between low quality mobile connectivity and areas with sparse populations, lower than average levels of affluence and a smaller percentage of working age population. As such, the industry needs to be incentivised to improve coverage in less profitable areas through either public funding, deregulation or mobile coverage obligations linked to the purchasing of mobile spectrum.
13. With this in mind, the Board’s Post-Brexit England Commission called on the Government to work with Ofcom to launch a rural roaming scheme allowing customers to roam onto one another’s networks in rural areas, should 4G coverage not reach 95 per cent of the geography of England by 2022.

Recent Developments

14. In response to growing calls for rural roaming, the mobile industry has come forward with an offer to build a ‘Shared Rural Network’. It is proposed that the four operators fund and develop a network of infrastructure which they will all share and use. The existing infrastructure of different operators in rural areas will become a single, shared network asset.
15. Mobile Network Operators have proposed that this programme will “virtually eliminate” partial not spots (where coverage is provided by one but not all MNOs). However, it will not solve total not spots. For those, the industry is also considering plans for a community funded total not spot programme.
16. In exchange for the commitment the industry has called for reforms to the planning system including the height of masts and the removal of Ofcom’s proposed coverage obligations attached to 700 MHz spectrum licences.
17. There remain many questions as to how the implementation of a Shared Rural Network would work, and the role Ofcom would play in holding MNOs to account on their proposed commitment. It is also unclear which areas would benefit from the new coverage, and how long it would take for the improvements to be felt by residents. We have called for Government to consult with a range of stakeholders, including the LGA before agreeing to a deal with MNOs.
18. In support of the mobile connectivity agenda, and in response to the MNOs’ Shared Rural Network proposition, the Government has [launched a consultation](#) seeking views on the principles of amending or creating new permitted development rights to enhance mobile connectivity. The four reforms are summarised below with more technical detail available in the consultation document.

Proposed change to/creation of permitted development to support mobile coverage	Change to council role
Enabling the deployment of equipment on land <u>without requiring prior approval</u> to support 5G deployment	Under current arrangements (prior approval), councils can only take into account a set of “prior approval conditions” set by Government and

<p>Strengthen existing masts to enable sites to be upgraded for 5G and for mast sharing <u>without prior approval</u>;</p>	<p>cannot consider wider local circumstances. There is also a requirement that the public be engaged before any infrastructure is deployed, to allow representations from local residents.</p> <p>Under new arrangements (requirement to notify) the council would only be notified by the infrastructure provider of its intention to build. The provider could then deploy after one calendar month's notice without the need to engage the community.</p>
<p>Enabling the deployment of building-based masts nearer to highways to support deployment of 5G and extend mobile coverage, <u>subject to prior approval</u>;</p> <p>Enabling higher masts to deliver better mobile coverage and mast sharing, <u>subject to prior approval</u></p>	<p>Under current arrangements (planning permission) full planning permission is required to undertake these deployments. This would allow the LPA to take on board local circumstances before choosing to approve or refuse the deployment</p> <p>Under new arrangements (prior approval), the LPA's ability to influence any new deployment would be reduced to a set of "prior approval conditions." There would still be a requirement for public engagement to allow representations from local residents.</p>

19. The Government has pitched these proposals as "a choice between balancing the importance of local democratically elected representatives making decisions on infrastructure which affect their local community and giving mobile network operators certainty that decreases the risk, cost and time associated with deployment of infrastructure."
20. At the time of writing, officers have invited officials from DCMS to speak to address the Board on the consultation. The LGA will respond to the consultation with oversight from lead members.
21. **Members are invited to review the current national policy context and comment on the planned Government planning consultation, including the balance to be struck between securing better connectivity for rural residents, and ensuring communities have a say on the deployment of infrastructure in their local area.**

The Rural Digital Connectivity Working Group

22. During the 2018/19 board cycle a Rural Digital Connectivity Working Group was established to take forward policy and lobbying work in this area, to allow the Board to devote more time to issues like the Post-Brexit England Commission and with a view to drawing in external officer support from ADEPT.

23. Although the working group allowed its five members the opportunity to engage in more detail on the connectivity agenda it required a degree of administrative overhead out of kilter with its purposes and the LGA resources available. Furthermore, the Board continued to express interest in taking forward work in this area and remains the key forum for engaging senior external stakeholders, such as the Chief Executive of Ofcom.
24. At the last Board of the 2018/19 cycle, members made clear their wish to continue the Board's strong focus on improving the digital connectivity available to rural and coastal residents and businesses. However, they agreed to defer a decision on member working arrangements on digital connectivity to the new Board and incoming Chairman.
25. Reflecting on the priority attached by the Board to work in this area, its national focus and the availability of LGA resources is suggested that members maintain a focus on digital connectivity via the full Board in place of a working group and in line with the Board's wider work programme.
- 26. Members are invited to confirm the decision made at the last Board meeting to bring digital connectivity back to the full Board and consequently not continue the working group this year.**

Next Steps

27. This upcoming Board cycle is an opportunity for members to build on their work to date, influence Government policy on behalf of the sector, and increase focus on supporting councils to catalyse improvements to mobile connectivity. In this regard, members are requested to give their steer on the suitability of pursuing the following areas of focus.
- 27.1. **Maintain a 'watching brief' on broadband connectivity:**
- 27.1.1. engage with councils to understand how the universal service obligation is being utilised by communities and feedback any barriers/concerns to Ofcom;
 - 27.1.2. liaise with Government to understand the role councils can play helping achieve the Government's full fibre by 2025 ambitions;
 - 27.1.3. press for legislation requiring developers to connect all new-builds to full fibre connectivity to be implemented.
- 27.2. **Continue the strong proactive focus on mobile connectivity:**
- 27.2.1. liaise with the mobile operators on their plans for a shared rural network, and lobbying Government and Ofcom to ensure MNOs will be adequately held to account in any future agreement.
 - 27.2.2. engage Ofcom by inviting the new Chief Executive (due in post January 2020) to the March meeting of the People and Places Board.
- 28. Members are invited to comment on the proposed priorities for the Board to pursue over the coming political cycle**