Digital delivery – policy context

Summary

Members, at their 15 September 2009 meeting, discussed the issue of the proposed transition to digital radio. Officers were asked to produce a follow-up paper that further developed the LGA policy position on digital issues, including the benefits they bring to local authorities and their residents.

Recommendations

1. That members note the report, and that both members and officers use this policy background to inform their lobbying on future digital issues as they arise.

2. That officers reflect the Board's discussion in September of the proposed transition to digital radio when lobbying on the proposed Digital Economy Bill; and that this position should include an acknowledgement of the benefits of the proposed move as well as the concerns that the Board has raised.

Action

Following members' comments, officers to take forward the agreed lobbying position with regard to digital radio.

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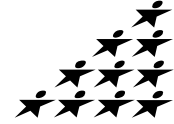
Digital delivery – policy context

Background

1. On 16 June the Government published *Digital Britain,* its strategic vision for ensuring that the UK is at the leading edge of the global digital economy. Digital Britain sets out actions and recommendations to promote and protect the creative industries, to modernise TV and radio frameworks and support local news, and introduces policies to maximise the social and economic benefits from digital technologies.

2. Members, at their 15 September 2009 meeting, discussed the issue of the proposed transition to digital radio. Officers were asked to produce a follow-up paper that further developed the LGA policy position on digital issues, including the benefits they bring to local authorities and their residents.

Policy Context

3. 18.3 million households in the UK (70%) had Internet access in 2009. This is an increase of just under 2 million households over the last year, and of 4 million households since figures were first collected in 2006. Of those households with Internet access, 90 per cent had a broadband connection in 2009, an increase from 69 per cent in 2006.

4. The growth of Internet access has revolutionised the provision of goods and services, including public services, and the way people access information. There are two principal areas of interest for the CTS board stemming from this new digital era:

    *   the impact of digital technology on councils as organisations and service providers and related question of access;
    *   the impact of digital technology on those policy areas that fall under the boards' remit.

5. The **impact of digital technology on councils** themselves has primarily focused how they are organised and on how they deliver public services to residents. In both cases there have been numerous local and national programmes designed to drive efficiency savings from new technologies, for example, by moving to online payment collection, delivery of services such as parking permit applications and provision of information to residents. Internally, digital technology allows for the streamlining of finance and HR functions and processes, remote working and video conferencing amongst other efficiency measures.

6. As well as efficiency savings, digital technology also allows for improvements to be made. Digital communications (email, bulletins, blogs etc) can support improved staff morale and productivity, and the increasing use of social media can improve
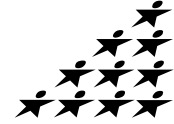
council's external relations with residents as well as providing a valuable source of feedback on perceptions of a councils' performance.

7.   Councils, though, need to be wary of opening up a digital divide, and of disenfranchising residents from basic services and information about these services where it is only made available online. The more public information is increasingly made available online, the more access to high-speed broadband becomes a basic utility akin to water or energy. We know that councils are interested in exploring how its provision can come to be treated in the same way as these utilities within the framework of public policy.

8.   Within the LGA Group, the impact of digital technology on councils as corporate organisations is largely considered a delivery issue. As such, this work is led by the IDeA, with member oversight provided through the LGA Improvement Board and Executive.

9.   The **impact of digital technology on culture and sport policy areas** has been substantial already, but is increasing. There have been specific programmes to improve the digital cultural offer, such as the development of www.culture24.org.uk, (which provides reviews, links, listings and education resources from thousands of UK museums, galleries, archives and libraries) and the roll out of the People's Network in local libraries. However, the infrastructure for the delivery of and access to culture is still fundamentally "off line" – that is, to be found in buildings owned that are run by local authrities, and accessed by the public, in the traditional manner.

10. The growing access to highspeed broadband has the potential to change the way that people create and consume culture, and is a development that councils will need to adapt to. For example:

- Library usage is slightly declining, for example, at the same time that vastly more information and entertainment can be provided online and at the command and timing of the "user". What does this mean for the traditional model of a public library service?
- Sport England are exploring the use of Facebook as a tool for bringing together people who wish to play sports outside of formal team / league structures. What does this mean for the way the National Governing Bodies organise themselves and progress talent?
- Members of the Tourism Working Group have discussed the impact of peer-to-peer review websites such as TripAdvisor on the traditional accommodation accreditation schemes.

11. One sector that has the potential to gain from the expansion of access to broadband and other digital technologies is the UK's creative industries, which are seen as a key growth area for the UK economy, with the potential to generate jobs, innovation and productivity. Through their planning, licensing, regulation and trading standards functions, their procurement practices and their relationships
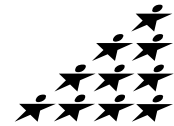
with further education, councils are perfectly placed to help support the growth of our creative industries. The CTS Board has already overseen the development of a toolkit for councils that want to invest in their creative industries, which is hosted on the IDeA website (http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=10079358).

Next steps

12. The Government proposes to take forward key parts of Digital Britain in a Digital Economy Bill to be announced in the Queen's Speech on 18 November 2009. The Government hopes the Bill will "secure the UK's position as one of the world's leading digital knowledge economies and take forward a new, more active industrial policy to maximise the benefits from the digital revolution". The key elements of the draft Bill are currently understood to be:

   • delivering a universally available broadband in the UK by 2012 through a public fund, including funds released from the digital television switchover help scheme;
   • giving the sectoral regulator, Ofcom, two new duties: first, to promote investment in infrastructure and content alongside its duties to promote competition; and second, to carry out a full assessment of the UK's communications infrastructure every two years; to ensure that the UK has a first class and resilient communications infrastructure;
   • various changes to broadcasting regulations, **including ensuring that all national broadcast radio stations are digital from the end of 2015;**
   • creating a robust legal and regulatory framework to combat illegal file sharing and other forms of online copyright infringement, and;
   • implementing the recommendations of the Byron Review published in June 2008, to put age ratings of computer games on a statutory footing for ratings of 12 years and above.

Financial Implications

13. None for the LGA.

Implications for Wales

14. To be taken forward as appropriate with the WLGA

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