

Company Number 11177145

The Rural Digital Connectivity Working Group

Purpose of report

For direction.

Summary

This paper outlines the work undertaken by the Rural Digital Connectivity Working Group over the 2018/19 political cycle. In line with the Working Group's Terms of Reference, it asks members to review the activities of the working group over the last year and comment on arrangements for taking forward the digital connectivity agenda in the next political cycle.

Recommendations

Members are invited to:

1. **Review** the activity of the Working Group over the 2018/19 political cycle.
2. **Consider** the future of the Working Group for the 2019/20 political cycle and **recommend** whether to continue or conclude it.

Actions

Officers will proceed as directed by members.

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Background

1. The People and Places Board has helped establish local government as a credible and respected voice in the field of digital connectivity. Members have been keen to build on this position and continue their focus on improving digital connectivity for rural and coastal businesses and residents. However, following the decision to expand the Board's work programme over the last year, members suggested trialling the creation of a Rural Digital Connectivity Working Group, consisting of members of the Board, supported by council officers from the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT).
2. This paper outlines the activities of the Working Group over the 2018/19 political cycle and asks members to consider whether they wish to continue using this model or steer future work in this area more directly through the Board.

The Working Group's activity to date

3. At the beginning of the political cycle, members agreed the Working Group would pursue the following priorities:
4. Engage with key stakeholders on the proposed roll out of the broadband USO and full fibre to rural areas.
 - 4.1. As the sole digital infrastructure provider delivering the broadband universal service obligation (USO), the Working Group met with Openreach to discuss the role local government can play helping expand digital connectivity to rural areas. In conversations with the provider it was clear there remained a lack of clarity from Government and Ofcom on how exactly the USO will be implemented.
 - 4.2. Since then, Ofcom launched a final consultation on [the implementation of the USO](#). The LGA submitted a formal response with oversight from lead members and the Working Group. It outlined:
 - 4.2.1. The LGA supports the maximum period of 12 months set out in the Digital Economy Act for residents to wait for an installation of a broadband connection under the Broadband USO.
 - 4.2.2. Under current legislation Ofcom is unable to require BT to introduce a USO social tariff. As such, the LGA outlined the regulator should at, the very least, seek a voluntary commitment from the provider to offer their broadband social tariff to USO customers.
 - 4.2.3. Ofcom should ensure all eligible consumers are made aware of their entitlement to a connection under the broadband USO by requiring BT to contact all eligible premises by post and ensure all information disseminated is as clear as possible.

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5. The Working Group also oversaw the drafting of a councillors' handbook on digital connectivity¹ funded by the Government's improvement grant received by the LGA.² It provides a clear and accessible guide to support backbench councillors with limited knowledge in this area who wish to help their communities improve their connectivity. It is due to be published in July 2019.

Ensuring fast and reliable digital connectivity is provided to new builds

6. Last year, LGA research in partnership with ThinkBroadband found that one in five rural homes built in the last three years was still not connected to superfast broadband. In July 2018, the Board's Post-Brexit England Commission interim report called for legislation to require developers to connect properties to future-proofed digital connectivity.
7. Since then, the Government launched a formal consultation on introducing such legislation at the Autumn Budget. It outlined proposals for developers to be able to invoke a "duty to connect" on broadband providers to force them to connect premises to gigabit capable infrastructure should a commercial agreement be unable to be reached via normal routes.
8. With the oversight of lead members and the Working Group, the LGA submitted a formal consultation response. It outlined:
 - 8.1. local government's support for Government to require broadband providers to connect new builds with full fibre broadband.
 - 8.2. Government should implement measures to monitor installation timescales over the first year of the proposal and, if necessary, bring broadband providers into line with the standard installation timeframes expected of utilities companies.
 - 8.3. More clarity is needed from Government on the role planning authorities will need to play if a broadband provider is challenged on the connectivity it has provided to a new build estate.
 - 8.4. Developers should engage with at least two network operators who can provide gigabit-capable connections to the development and must also inform the council with digital infrastructure responsibility, such as county councils in two tier areas, of their plans.
 - 8.5. Government must undertake proper modelling to understand how many properties could potentially breach the threshold of £3,000 per premises connection cost, and thus be unserved by gigabit connectivity.

¹ You can find examples of other councillor workbooks on [our website](#).

² Unlike the Board's policy budget the improvement grant provided by MHCLG cannot be used to develop lobbying positions. Rather it is specifically to fund "a support programme to help local authorities to continue to improve and reform, by building the capacity and capability of the sector to enhance its effectiveness and resilience."

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Pushing for ubiquitous 4G coverage

9. Many rural areas face challenges in terms of the quality of mobile coverage they receive, the lack of choice of mobile network operator (MNO) locally, and the prevalence of ‘not spots.’
10. During the last political cycle, the Working Group engaged Ofcom’s mobile connectivity team to discuss the LGA’s submission to the regulator’s first 700 MHz and 3.6-3.8 GHz spectrum/improving mobile coverage consultation. This political cycle, Ofcom launched a second consultation on the updated coverage conditions it plans to place on MNOs. As part of its formal response the LGA outlined:
 - 10.1. Disappointment that Ofcom had rolled back on its original coverage obligations and increased the deadline for MNOs to meet them from 3 to 4 years.
 - 10.2. Ofcom must raise their England landmass coverage obligation back to the previously suggested level of 92 per cent.
 - 10.3. Government must clarify how it would meet its manifesto commitment to ensure mobile coverage to 95 per cent geographic coverage of the UK by 2022, considering these newly rolled back obligations.
11. People and Places Board Chairman Cllr Mark Hawthorne was also invited to a mobile connectivity roundtable hosted by consumer organisation Which? and attended by a range of business, rural and consumer stakeholders. There was consensus across the room for the Government and Ofcom to consider regulatory measures such as rural roaming (where a mobile can switch to the strongest signal from any mobile network operator) to incentivise the market to provide excellent coverage in rural areas.
12. Finally, ADEPT digital connectivity officers held a mobile connectivity roundtable with representatives of mobile network operators chaired by member of the Working Group, Cllr Rob Waltham. At the meeting the following was discussed:
 - 12.1. Mobile operators felt there was a need for “more barrier busting at local level” to enable effective decision-making about mobile infrastructure.
 - 12.2. Council officers outlined that the mobile industry hasn’t been able to fully articulate how previous planning relaxations delivered only a few years ago have resulted in better coverage outcomes for rural communities.
 - 12.3. Mobile operators data on coverage was also discussed and how it does not always reflect the reality on the ground for customers.
 - 12.4. Both sides agreed to consider publishing joint guidance to help councils and mobile network operators work better in partnership to ensure improved connectivity for residents and businesses.

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13. Members are invited to note the activity of the Rural Digital Connectivity Working Group to date.

The future of the Rural Digital Connectivity Working Group

14. As part of its terms of reference, the Working Group must be reviewed by the People and Places Board in accordance with the annual board cycle.

15. Given their national leadership role, it is expected that the Board will wish to continue its strong focus on improving the digital connectivity available to rural and coastal residents and businesses. However, this ambition will need to be balanced by the resources available to the Board and its capacity to meaningfully impact on other areas of policy, such as those identified by the Post-Brexit England Commission: trade, industrial strategy and rural land management.

16. As outlined at the start of the paper, the Working Group was established in the expectation that its activities would be supported by council officers from ADEPT. Over the last two months it has become apparent that the ability of council officers to provide extra capacity to resource it is significantly more limited than first thought. As such, the Working Group has been resourced and run within LGA officer capacity alone.

17. Over the political cycle, officer capacity dedicated to the Working Group has enabled it to act as a sounding board for LGA activity in this area and engage with stakeholders from the telecommunications industry. However, this has been in lieu of the wider engagement of the Board on the digital connectivity agenda including its ability to meet and lobby senior figures from Government and Ofcom.

18. With a new incoming Board and Chairman, it is suggested that members recommend concluding the Working Group at this juncture and allow the new Board to consider how best to continue its digital connectivity focus in the 2019/20 political cycle.

19. Members are invited to consider the future of the Working Group for the 2019/20 political cycle and **recommend** whether to continue or conclude it.