

## Rural Digital Connectivity

### Purpose of report

For direction.

### Summary

As background to Raj Kalia, Chief Executive of the Government broadband delivery team Building Digital UK attending the Board, this paper provides members with an update on the national digital connectivity policy context and proposes a set of actions for the Board to pursue over the remaining political cycle.

### Recommendations

In relation to the visit of BDUK, members are invited to:

- **Comment** on the Government's proposed design of the publicly funded gigabit broadband as presented by BDUK and discussed in paragraphs 5-6.
- **Reflect** on the value for money that councils have achieved as leads of local roll out of superfast broadband and the risk that an overly centralised Whitehall programme could pose to local delivery.

Separately, members are also asked to:

- **Approve** the new Ofcom Chief Executive being invited to the June People and Places Board as outlined in paragraph 11.
- **Comment** on the new Shared Rural Network commitment and share their thoughts on how councils could engage with the agenda as outlined in paragraphs 12-15.
- **Suggest** areas of this policy space that the Board's new digital connectivity spokesperson might wish to explore as outlined in paragraphs 17-18.

### Action

- Officers will proceed as directed by members.

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## Rural Digital Connectivity

### Background

1. As background to a presentation the Board will receive from the Government's broadband delivery team, Building Digital UK, this paper provides members with an update on the national digital connectivity policy context and proposes a set of actions for the Board to pursue over the remaining political cycle.

### The National Policy Context

#### Broadband

2. The Government has committed to rolling out gigabit-capable broadband to all premises by 2025, bringing forward the previous government target by eight years.
3. As part of the design of the Superfast Broadband Programme in 2011, the then Government stated that "in line with [its] agenda on localism"<sup>1</sup> local bodies would be encouraged to take on the management of local roll outs and lead the development, sourcing and delivery of broadband projects in their areas. Almost 50 councils took up that offer in England alone, and have since managed over £500 million of public funding to successfully pass over 3.7 million premises.<sup>2</sup>
4. As the Programme draws to a close, councils have reflected on the benefit that local control over roll out has provided to residents. Over the last eight years, local government has developed significant expertise, local knowledge and datasets to help hold providers to account on their delivery, helping achieve the value for money for the tax payer and a considerable number of "premises passed."
5. At present, to deliver its new gigabit-broadband ambitions, the Government plans to take the contract management of local roll out in-house and run the publicly funded gigabit broadband programme centrally from Whitehall.
6. There is a concern amongst councils as to the potential risks of centralising the roll out of publicly funded gigabit broadband, especially when set against the success of the council-led roll out of the Superfast Broadband Programme. However, with the Government's much tighter 2025 target, and with the project considered of great personal importance to the Prime Minister, it is perhaps unsurprising that Whitehall has chosen to take more control of delivery in-house.
7. With this in mind, the extent to which the LGA can influence the Government's ambitions to centralise local contract management is significantly limited. However, there remains much that can be done to advocate for councils to play a significant role in local roll out decisions and actions across local areas.

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<sup>1</sup> [DCMS Superfast Broadband Programme Bidding guidance](#) (2011)

<sup>2</sup> [BDUK list of Superfast Broadband Programme local projects](#) (as of September 2019)

8. In this regard, Government engagement with councils, via the Building Digital UK team (formerly Broadband Delivery UK) has been positive and the LGA is well placed to influence the design of a new programme via the ADEPT digital connectivity officers working group which has set up a joint task and finish group with BDUK on the design of the programme.
9. The visit of Raj Kalia, Chief Executive of BDUK (biography **Appendix A**) to the Board also provides members with an opportunity to outline the value that councils have brought to the local roll out of superfast broadband and the risk that an overly centralised Whitehall programme could pose to local delivery. Members will be provided with a confidential briefing to support their conversations. After the meeting, officers will write to the Minister for Digital and Broadband, Matt Warman MP, to outline the LGA's position on any future public funded broadband roll out following the conversation with BDUK.

**10. In relation to the visit of BDUK members are invited to:**

- 10.1. **Comment** on the Government's proposed design of the publicly funded gigabit broadband as presented by BDUK and discussed in paragraphs 4-6.
- 10.2. **Reflect** on the value for money that councils have achieved as leads of local roll out of superfast broadband and the risk that an overly centralised Whitehall programme could pose to local delivery.

*Mobile connectivity*

11. Over the past four years, the People and Places Board has campaigned for improved mobile coverage to be provided to their communities. Many have outlined the disconnect in local areas between mobile network operators' coverage claims and the real-life mobile experience of residents. Using evidence from councils on the ground, the LGA launched [a press release](#) last month calling on Ofcom and Government to act. It recommended local areas should be given annual health checks by Ofcom via on-the-ground testing to verify mobile operators' coverage claims. The release was picked up in [The Independent](#), [The Sun](#), [The Daily Telegraph](#), [The Daily Mail](#), [ITV](#) and Cllr John Fuller appeared on [BBC Radio 4 You and Yours](#) (7 minutes in). This media coverage will provide a good platform for the Board to engage the new Ofcom Chief Executive, Melanie Dawes on this important agenda. It is suggested a letter is written to the new Chief Executive inviting her to the June People and Places Board, following a successful discussion at a previous Board with then Chief Executive, Sharon White.
12. At the last Board, members were informed about mobile network operators' joint commercial proposal to Government to form a new "Shared Rural Network" (SRN) to improve rural coverage. This has now been formally signed by Government and MNOs. It commits all four operators to improving their network coverage to 92 per cent of the UK's geography by 2025 with an aggregate of at least one operator covering 95 per cent. This will be achieved through MNOs opening and sharing existing masts and infrastructure between each other.
13. The SRN will also include a £530 million scheme, matched by £500 million of public funding to provide coverage to total not spot areas.

14. The LGA has noted the SRN as a positive step forward from the industry. However, as part of its [response to the Government's recent mobile connectivity planning consultation](#) we outlined it should not be at the cost of planning deregulation. It also remains to be seen how Ofcom will hold MNOs to account on their yearly progress up to the 2025 target.

15. With the SRN in mind, it is appropriate to consider the future position the LGA will adopt. It is suggested this comprises two elements:

15.1. Begin to push for mobile industry to adopt a collaborative approach to SRN roll out, engaging local government in local areas that will be covered, and working with the LGA to share examples of a local good practice.

15.2. Continue pressure on Ofcom as the telecommunications regulator, to improve the way it monitors mobile operator coverage claims in order to hold them to account on their SRN commitments. This would include undertaking local connectivity analysis to test the veracity of mobile operators' coverage maps.

**16. Members are invited to:**

16.1. **Approve** the new Ofcom Chief Executive being invite to the June People and Places Board as outlined in paragraph 11

16.2. **Comment** on the new Shared Rural Network proposal and share their thoughts on how councils could engage with the agenda going forward as outlined in paragraphs 12-15

### **Digital Connectivity spokesperson for the Board**

17. Following conversations between the Chairman and former Chairman of the People and Places Board, and in agreement with the LGA Political Groups, Cllr Mark Hawthorne will take on the role as the LGA's interim digital connectivity spokesperson for the remainder of this political cycle.

18. Given the particular interest of the Board in this space, members will now have the opportunity to select a digital connectivity spokesperson at the beginning of the next Board cycle should they wish. The role will involve helping shape future LGA digital connectivity policy in partnership with the People and Places Board and attending relevant meetings with digital connectivity stakeholders on behalf of the current Chairman. It is suggested that the Board still engages with key stakeholders over the political cycle, such as the Ofcom Chief Executive, but that the spokesperson will cover activity and meetings the Board and Chairman will not have the capacity to undertake.

**19. Members are invited to:**

19.1. **Suggest** areas of this policy space that the new spokesperson role might wish to explore or digital connectivity stakeholders they should engage as outlined in paragraphs 17-18

**Implications for Wales**

20. Digital infrastructure policy is a devolved responsibility.

**Financial Implications**

21. The Board's activities are supported by budgets for policy development and improvement.  
The research will be funded from the Board's budget for policy development.

## **Appendix A**

### **Raj Kalia, Chief Executive, BDUK**

Raj is the CEO of Building Digital U.K. (BDUK) leading delivery of digital infrastructure programmes for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport. He leads the Department's work on the UK Full Fibre Programme, the Superfast Broadband Programme, Local Full Fibre Networks (LFFN) and the Rural Gigabit Connectivity scheme.

Prior to this position, Raj spent 14 years at TalkTalk in roles including the Director of Innovation, Director of Major Projects, and Director of Technology Transformation.

