

## **Rural Digital Connectivity**

### **Purpose of report**

For direction.

### **Summary**

This paper and separate confidential briefing provide members with an update on digital connectivity policy in preparation for the visit of Raj Kalia, Chief Executive, Building Digital UK (the broadband delivery arm of Government) to the Board. It also proposes a set of actions for the Board to pursue over the upcoming political cycle.

#### **Recommendations**

Members are invited to:

1. **Note** the current digital connectivity policy context outlined in **paragraphs 2-15**.
2. **Comment** on the set of actions for the Board to pursue over the new political cycle in **paragraph 16**
3. **Note** the separate briefing to support discussions with Mr Kalia at the Board

#### **Action**

1. Officers will proceed as directed by members.

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## **Rural Digital Connectivity**

### **Background**

1. This paper and separate confidential briefing provide members with an update on digital connectivity policy in preparation for the visit of Raj Kalia, Chief Executive, Building Digital UK (the broadband delivery arm of Government) to the Board. It also proposes a set of actions for the Board to pursue over the upcoming political cycle.

### Connectivity during the Covid-19 pandemic

2. The Covid-19 emergency has served to further highlight the importance of fast and reliable digital connectivity and has given the Government fresh impetus to deliver its pledge to roll out gigabit-broadband across the UK by 2025.
3. Ofcom has reported that the UK's broadband networks held up well over the course of the pandemic with only small degradation to speeds.<sup>1</sup> However, in rural areas in which only slower speeds are available, any degradation of speed however small will have had a significant effect on user experience.
4. Throughout the crisis, LGA officers were in regular contact with telecommunication providers and Government to understand the work being undertaken to keep networks running. This included exploring how councils could enable providers to undertake essential maintenance to digital infrastructure on public sites and roads while ensuring their communities and workforces remain safe.

### **The National Policy Context**

#### Broadband

5. Following the success of the local government-led Superfast Broadband Programme, the Government has committed to rolling out gigabit broadband to all premises by 2025, bringing forward the previous government target by eight years.
6. Over the last eight years, almost 50 councils have held responsibility for contract managing publicly funded roll out in local areas and, as such, have developed significant expertise, local knowledge and coverage datasets to help hold broadband providers to account on their delivery and achieve the value for money for the taxpayer. To deliver on its new ambitions however, the Government has chosen to take the contract management in-house and run the publicly funded gigabit broadband programme centrally from Whitehall.
7. Since June, the LGA and BDUK have been engaging on the design of the future roll out programme. The LGA Chairman and Cllr Mark Hawthorne, LGA Digital Connectivity Spokesperson met with Matt Warman MP, Digital Infrastructure Minister to outline the important contribution that councils can make to help Government deliver on its ambitions faster. This was followed by detailed discussions between Building Digital UK CEO Raj Kalia, People and Places Board Chairman, Cllr Kevin Bentley, and Cllr Mark Hawthorne.
8. BDUK confirmed at those meetings that the decision to bring contract management in-house has now been finalised. However, both the Minister and civil servants were keen to

emphasise the importance of central and local government working in partnership to successfully deliver the future programme. What remains to be decided is the form this partnership will take, the specific responsibilities and influence local government will have over local roll out, and how local council officer capacity will be funded once the Superfast Broadband Programme completes.

9. During these meetings, and as part of the LGA's response to the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review consultation we have called on Government to provide funding for local government to put in place a local digital champion to help co-ordinate delivery locally. This must also be complemented with a top-up fund which councils can access to recruit extra capacity within highways and planning teams to respond to surges in local roll out activity, such as streetworks permit requests or planning applications, that take place when a provider commences roll out in a specific area.
10. Accompanying this paper is a briefing to guide members' discussions with Raj Kalia, Chief Executive of BDUK (biography **Appendix A**). His visit to the Board provides members with a key opportunity to outline the value that councils have brought to the local roll out of superfast broadband and make clear the risk that an overly centralised Whitehall programme could pose to local delivery. Members have been provided with a confidential briefing to support their conversations.

#### Mobile connectivity

11. Over the past four years, the People and Places Board has campaigned for improved mobile coverage to be provided to rural communities. Many have outlined the disconnect between mobile network operators' coverage claims and the real-life mobile experience of their residents. Using evidence from councils on the ground, earlier this year the LGA issued a press release 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.
12. This media coverage will provide a good platform to engage the new Ofcom Chief Executive, Melanie Dawes on this important agenda. An introductory meeting is being set up between the new Chief Executive and the LGA's Digital Connectivity Spokesperson to address this key issue.
13. At the start of the year, the Government also confirmed a joint commercial agreement with mobile network operators' to form a new "Shared Rural Network" (SRN) to improve rural coverage. The proposal 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.
14. The SRN will also include a £530 million publicly funded scheme in areas that are total not spots with no coverage from any provider.

15. 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.
16. Since that response, the Government confirmed it will proceed with proposed planning reforms that will demote planning requirements for taller masts from a planning application to permitted development. The LGA will use the Government's upcoming technical consultation on the reforms to re-emphasise the importance of community engagement in these decisions.

### **Next steps**

17. This upcoming Board cycle is an opportunity for members to build on their work to date influencing the Government's design of the gigabit-broadband roll out and 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.

#### **17.1. Work to influence councils' role in the roll out of gigabit-broadband**

- 17.1.1. Continue the Board's focus liaising with Government to understand the role councils can play helping achieve the Government's full fibre by 2025 ambitions. It is suggested the Digital Infrastructure Minister Matt Warman be invited to a Board in the New Year.

#### **17.2. Continue the strong proactive focus on mobile connectivity including**

- 17.2.1. Seek an introductory meeting between the LGA's Digital Connectivity Spokesperson and the new Ofcom Chief Executive to raise key lines relating to mobile connectivity.
- 17.2.2. 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.

18. Members are invited to comment on the proposed priorities for the Board to pursue over the coming political cycle

### **Implications for Wales**

19. Digital infrastructure policy is a devolved responsibility.

### **Financial Implications**

20. 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.

