

## Digital Connectivity

### Purpose of report

For direction.

### Summary

This paper provides members with three priority areas for digital connectivity policy over the 2021/22 political cycle and sets out proposed actions for discussion with the LGA's Digital Champion, Councillor Mark Hawthorne (see Appendix A).

### Recommendations

Members are invited to:

- **Agree**, subject to a discussion with Cllr Mark Hawthorne, the proposed actions for the People and Places Board to pursue over the 2021/22 political cycle as set out in paragraph 21.

### Actions

- Officers will take forward the actions as set out above.

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## **Rural Digital Connectivity**

### **Digital Connectivity**

#### **Background**

1. This paper sets out a digital connectivity work programme for the Board to discuss with the LGA's Digital Champion, Councillor Mark Hawthorne (Appendix A).
2. The LGA's [Councillor's Guide to Digital Connectivity](#) is a useful guide to the main issues and challenges facing local areas, a brief overview of Government policy, glossary of widely used terms and a description of the vital role councillors can play in this area.
3. Reflecting previous discussions with members, this paper focuses on three areas: the role of digital connectivity in 'levelling up' communities; the rollout of ultrafast broadband; and the implementation of the shared rural network.
4. Subject to the discussion at the meeting, the Board is asked to agree the work programme set out below.

#### **Connectivity and levelling up communities**

5. Digital exclusion is inextricably linked to wider inequalities in society, and is more likely to be faced by those on [low incomes](#), [people over 65](#) and disabled people. When the pandemic hit in March 2020, only 51 per cent of households earning between £6,000 to £10,000 had home internet access compared with 99 per cent of households with an income over £40,000. Even when poorer households had access to equipment and internet, they [were less likely to have the skills to utilise it](#).
6. Reliable digital connectivity is vital to allow people to fully participate in society. As we recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, tackling the digital divide will be essential to address social and economic inequalities and level up every community.
7. Following the recent cabinet reshuffle there have been changes to the ministers in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) who hold the digital portfolios (see Appendix B). A letter (see attached in Appendix 1) has been sent from the LGA's Digital Connectivity Champion and Creative Industries Champion congratulating Julia Lopez on her new role as Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure and offering to meet to discuss how we can continue to work with the department to deliver positive outcomes for our communities.
8. The LGA's Levelling Up Local inquiry provides an opportune moment to bring together stakeholders to discuss the role of local government in strengthening local digital capital

and innovation to support the levelling up agenda. There is also the opportunity to include the City Regions Board in looking into themes around digital exclusion, which impact urban as well as rural areas. It is proposed we run a complementary round table for members of both boards to explore these areas in greater detail and the outcomes of the discussion will be used to inform the boards' future work.

9. The LGA's new publication '[Councils' role supporting the digital skills pipeline](#)', alongside [LG Inform forecasts for digital employment](#), outlines the key roles councils play in supporting local digital skills progression, which, in turn, plays a vital role in levelling up communities. It is proposed the LGA organises a webinar for both councillors and officers with digital and skills portfolios to promote the guide. The webinar will include speakers from the case studies showcasing successful interventions to date. This will allow good practice to be replicated on a wider scale, supporting the areas that are forecast to experience high levels of future growth for tech specialists.
10. Telephone providers are in the process of upgrading the landline network, also known as the PSTN (Public Switched Telephone Network) from analogue to digital or IP (Internet Protocol) which means in future voice telephone calls will be carried in the same way as data over a broadband connection. The current telephone network will close at the end of 2025. There will be changes to the way some equipment works with the new technology, for example devices connected to a home phone line such as telecare alarms, emergency pendants, dialysis machines and telemetry devices may no longer be compatible, disproportionately impacting vulnerable groups. To mitigate the impact of the switch-over we propose to work with both central government and industry representatives to provide a joint communications plan to increase awareness about the forthcoming changes.
11. The Board will continue to keep a watching brief on issues which may affect the Government's ambitions to level-up every part of the country.

## **Broadband**

12. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted that broadband is essential infrastructure. Access to fast and reliable broadband connectivity is vital to help communities stay connected, drive inclusive recoveries, create quality jobs, improve quality of life and level up local areas.
13. We are disappointed by the downgraded target of 85 per cent gigabit-capable coverage by 2025 but will continue to work with Government to achieve this new target and call for funding for councils to support with the coordination and delivery locally and spur on demand. We have been working with the LGA public affairs team to highlight the importance of good digital connection, collating a [briefing for a Westminster Hall Debate](#)

[on Tackling the Digital Divide](#) and submitting evidence to the Public Accounts Committee inquiry into [DCMS recall \(broadband\)](#).

14. The previous CEO of Building Digital UK, Raj Kalia attended a People and Places Board meeting in the last political cycle. There has since been a change in leadership with Paul Norris taking over the role. It is proposed that Paul Norris is invited to a future Board meeting to progress our conversations with BDUK.
15. The recent review of Community-led Internet Service Providers' plans by BDUK, and subsequent announcement to pause the Gigabit voucher scheme was a cause for concern and on 21 September the [LGA responded to a House of Commons debate on Project Gigabit and Community Led Internet Service Providers](#). While concessions now have been made to community-led internet service providers, we want to ensure there will be no future delays to the pace of roll-out which will result in communities who have broadband below super-fast speeds being further left behind and will raise this issue with Paul Norris at the suggested meeting.

### **Mobile connectivity**

16. The People and Places Board has campaigned for improved mobile coverage to be provided to their communities. The Shared Rural Network (SRN) will deliver reliable mobile broadband from at least one operator to 95 per cent of the UK. We will be working with ADEPT Digital Connectivity Working Group to ensure the SRN delivers on its promise of improved mobile connectivity in remote communities.
17. It is proposed that the Board invites a senior representative from DCMS who oversees the SRN to attend a future meeting to provide an update on progress and give members an opportunity to raise any concerns around coverage. Members can view the current coverage for their local authority area using this [heat map](#).
18. Following this, it would be well timed for the Board to engage with the Ofcom Chief Executive, Melanie Dawes on this important agenda. It is suggested that an introductory meeting is set up between the Chief Executive and the LGA's Digital Connectivity Spokesperson to address areas of concern and set out what councils can do to support better connectivity locally.
19. 5G is short for 'fifth generation mobile networks' and is technology that will provide the underlying wireless infrastructure to support a host of new applications such as connected cars, virtual and augmented reality, and the foundations for Internet of Things (IoT) technologies such as wearable health monitors and autonomous farming equipment. The Board might like to consider the challenges and opportunities of 5G in a non-metropolitan context.

### **Next steps**

20. The upcoming Board cycle is an opportunity for members to build on their work to date influencing the Government's gigabit-broadband roll out and supporting councils to

catalyse improvements to mobile connectivity as well as considering ways in which digital connectivity can support the levelling up of communities post Covid-19.

21. The following list details suggested actions for the Board's work programme:

- 21.1 run a digital exclusion round table event alongside the Levelling Up Local Inquiry;
- 21.2 organise a webinar promoting councils' role supporting the digital skills pipeline;
- 21.3 invite Paul Norris of BDUK to speak to the Board;
- 21.4 invite a senior representative from DCMS who oversees the Shared Rural Network; to a future Board meeting;
- 21.5 arrange a meeting between Melanie Dawes of Ofcom and Cllr Mark Hawthorne;
- 21.6 continued working with the ADEPT Digital Connectivity Working Group;
- 21.7 continued public affairs activity.

22. Members are invited to comment on which of the three proposed areas and suggested actions the Board should prioritise over the coming political cycle.

### **Implications for Wales**

23. Digital infrastructure policy is a devolved responsibility.

### **Financial Implications**

24. 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.

### **Equalities Implications**

25. The equalities impact of poor and unreliable digital connectivity will be considered, specifically the social and economic issues that worsen outcomes and prevent the levelling up of communities in rural areas. We commit to strengthening our evidence base in this area.

## **Appendix A**

### **Cllr Mark Hawthorne MBE, Local Government Association Digital Champion**

First elected to Gloucester City Council in 1998 at the age of 22, Cllr Mark Hawthorne went on to become the council's youngest leader in 2004 before deciding to step down in 2007.

Cllr Hawthorne returned to local Government in 2009 when he was elected to Gloucestershire County Council. He became Leader a year later becoming one of the youngest upper tier authority leaders in the country. He was re-elected as leader following the May 2013 elections and was awarded an MBE for services to local government in the 2014 New Year Honours list. He is Chairman of the Conservative Councillors' Association.



Cllr Hawthorne is a member of the LGA's Resources Board and current LGA Digital Champion. The role of the LGA Digital Champion involves helping shape future LGA digital connectivity policy in partnership with the People and Places Board and attending relevant meetings with digital connectivity stakeholders both with and on behalf of the current Chairman.

## **Appendix B**

### **Julia Lopez MP, Minister of State at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport**

Julia is a Conservative politician and Member of Parliament for Hornchurch and Upminster since the 2017 general election. Before entering the House of Commons, she served as a local councillor on Tower Hamlets Council, and a parliamentary aide.



Prior to her appointment as Minister of State at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Julia was previously Parliamentary Secretary at the cabinet Office from 14 February 2020 to 15 September 2021.

Julia's portfolio covers telecoms and digital infrastructure, data policy and reform, cyber security and digital identity, media and creative industries and corporate business.

### **Chris Philp MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Tech and the Digital Economy)**

Chris is a Conservative politician and Member of Parliament for Croydon South since 2015.



He was previously Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Home Office and Ministry of Justice from February 2020 to September 2021. He was Minister for London at MHCLG from December 2019 to February 2020.

Chris' portfolio covers digital and tech policy, online safety, international strategy, gambling and lotteries and legislation.