

## Digital Levelling Up

### Purpose of report

For discussion.

### Summary

This paper provides an overview of recent policy and public affairs activity relating to digital connectivity and proposes a new work programme focused on addressing digital exclusion for the Board to consider, including a session on 'digital levelling up' at the LGA's annual conference.

Is this report confidential? Yes  No

### Recommendations

Members are invited to:

1. **Note** recent policy and public affairs activity in relation to digital connectivity
2. **Consider** the proposal to start new work on the role councils can play in addressing digital exclusion.

### Action

3. Subject to feedback from the Board, officers will develop a more detailed work programme including confirming the detail of the session planned for LGA Annual Conference.

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## Digital levelling up

### Background

1. Following a steer from Board members, officers have continued to take forward public affairs and policy work relating to digital connectivity, working with the LGA's digital connectivity champion Cllr Mark Hawthorne.
2. The LGA has [responded](#) to a Westminster Hall Debate on digital inclusion, responded to the National Infrastructure Commission's baseline report call for evidence, submitted evidence and subsequently [responded](#) to a PAC report into Project Gigabit which had [wide coverage from news outlets including the BBC](#), briefed for a Westminster Hall debate on ultrafast broadband in Devon and Somerset, and met with the head of regional tech policy at DCMS.
3. We also [responded](#) to the Levelling Up White Paper target for the UK to have nationwide gigabit-capable broadband and 4G coverage by 2030 and our response was picked up by [national outlets](#). We shared a [press response](#) to the Government's announcement of eight pilot areas to speed up 5G rollout and Cllr Hawthorne gave an interview at the end of February to the BBC about the gigabit capable broadband rollout. We also issued a [press release](#) in response to the Government's announcement of a change in the planning laws to increase the use of permitted development rights in relation to the size of mobile masts.
4. Officers also continue to keep a watching brief on wider issues around digital connectivity. The proposed changes to the electronic communications code (ECC) are laid out within the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill which is currently at committee stage going through the House of Commons. There is currently an [open consultation](#) on the proposal for new telecoms security regulations and code of practice. The retirement of the published switched telephone network (PSTN) for new digital technologies continues to be cause for concern impacting on both council infrastructure as well as services for residents and officers are launching a working group led by the LGA to share good practice and discuss challenges and a PSTN hub on the LGA website to disseminate useful resources.
5. The Board has long called for further funding from Government for digital connectivity champions to help co-ordinate delivery locally. Mobile UK now echoes these calls having recently published research calling on Government to [fund local authority digital champions](#). Cllr Hawthorne is accompanying LGA officers to the next ADEPT Digital Connectivity Officers Group meeting in April to discuss digital connectivity champions with the group, including how the role works in practice and how we can refine our call on Government and gather further support. Cllr Hawthorne has similar conversations planned with District Councils Network and County Council Network officers and

following these we plan to use our strengthened position to lobby DCMS and the Barrier Busting Taskforce.

6. We are now well established as an important voice on digital connectivity, but as the policy agenda is currently in a largely technical phase there is now space for the Board to play a defining role in the increasingly high-profile area of digital exclusion.
7. As such, it is proposed that, while we will continue to advocate for improved digital connectivity across the country we will also seek to expand our work around digital inclusion. This will be crucial to addressing social and economic inequalities and levelling up every community.
8. The next section of this paper provides an initial overview of the relevant policy issues that the People and Places Board might wish to explore in further detail including data poverty, the implications of upgrading infrastructure and evolving patterns of internet usage.

### **Understanding the impacts of digital exclusion on people and places**

9. 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](#).
10. Rural areas face specific challenges associated with digital exclusion. In 2019 Ofcom figures showed only 18 per cent of over-75s used smartphones compared with 95 per cent of 16- to 24-year-olds. Rural areas, which have an older-than-average population, feel this challenge most acutely. Due to poorer transport networks in rural areas and longer distances to delivery venues it can be more difficult and expensive for people to access outreach venues. Additional challenges associated with disability, older age and low income are compounded in rural areas. Tinder Foundation's Rural Action Research found hard-to-reach groups living in rural areas are more likely to suffer from increased social isolation.

### **Data poverty**

11. A recent report by Nesta (2020) defined data poverty as 'those individuals, households or communities who cannot afford sufficient, private and secure mobile or broadband data to meet their essential needs.' To date there have been several initiatives designed to support those at risk of data poverty. For example, the coronavirus pandemic saw [UK providers agree to remove data caps](#) on fixed-line broadband, DHSC worked with mobile networks to [remove data charges for online NHS services](#) during the pandemic, and more recently DWP, working with TalkTalk, rolled out a new voucher scheme giving

jobseekers free access to high-quality broadband. However, the schemes are often short-term and co-ordinated by different government departments resulting in limited long-term impact. Last July [Ofcom published a report looking into the affordability of communications services](#) and found targeted discounted tariffs can provide an important safety net for households with the most acute affordability issues.

12. An area where data poverty persists is among the 25 million customers on pay-as-you-go mobile tariffs who are at an increased risk due to of high data charges. Those who are under the age of eighteen, don't have a bank account, live in transient or insecure housing, and have unstable employment are more likely to not be able to access contracts meaning the most vulnerable groups including care leavers, prison leavers, refugees and asylum seekers are at high risk of data poverty. As a result, these people are unable to access vital services and support, raising the question of how public services at all levels ensure they are hearing from the voices of those who are completely excluded from the digital world.
13. Tackling data poverty will provide vulnerable groups across society with better access to key services including housing provision, employment services and healthcare information, with World Health Organisation figures showing being cut off from the digital landscape is linked to poorer health and lower life expectancy. This, in turn, will improve the economic and social prosperity of communities. Research into who is most at risk of data poverty has been limited to date.

#### Implications of upgrading infrastructure

14. The integration of the public switched telephone network (PSTN) will see operating analogue-based products supported on the old PSTN completely phased out by 2025 and replaced with an all-digital network. Telecare devices such as personal alarms and fall detectors are largely analogue products putting the 1.7 million vulnerable people who rely on technology enabled care at the most risk. In a similar vein, Vodafone has recently announced it will be switching off its UK 3G network by the end of next year. This will impact disproportionately on older people as well as low-income households who are unable to afford smartphone technology. Infrastructure upgrades are hailed as forward thinking and widely supported. However, there has been little research into which groups of people are more likely own older infrastructure and therefore most susceptible to being excluded from vital services when digital switchovers occur.

#### Evolving patterns of use

15. The coronavirus pandemic has seen more communities become reliant on accessing technology and having a fast and reliable broadband connection to support home working, access to services and keep in touch with family and friends. A recent [study by the ONS](#) looking into internet access found digital banking to have increased by 30% between 2007 and 2020 with 49% of adults in Great Britain aged 25 to 34 using a virtual assistant smart speaker or app. Looking at emerging trends on a macro-level, [PwC](#)

[identified](#) online video and accelerated dropping of paid television channels and subscriptions as the main driving force behind the rapid growth in global data consumption since the start of the pandemic. Board members may be interested in examining the evolving patterns of data usage across the country to determine where greater service investment will be required in the future.

### Role of Local Government

16. Councils have a key role to play in improving the lives and prospects of residents through tackling digital exclusion, whether through supporting programmes to improve peoples' digital skills, or lowering the barriers to access to data, such as through free Wi-Fi or making ICT equipment available in libraries and other public buildings. Through understanding which groups are most vulnerable and excluded from current structures, there comes an opportunity to lobby government for greater support and resources to assist future service pressures.

### LGA annual conference

17. The LGA annual conference is taking place from 28 to 30 June and officers have secured a slot on Wednesday 29 11.30am to 12.15pm for a plenary session on 'digital levelling up'. To date, officers have invited Helen Milner, Chief Executive of [Good Things Foundation](#) and MP Selaine Saxby, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Broadband and Digital Connectivity to speak in the session with Cllr Mark Hawthorne as Chair. Officers will build the digital exclusion topics of greatest priority to Board Members into the session.

### **Next steps**

18. Members are invited to:
  - 18.1 **Note** recent policy and public affairs activity in relation to digital connectivity
  - 18.2 **Consider** the proposal to start new work on the role councils can play in addressing digital exclusion.
19. Officers will use Board Members' comments to develop a more detailed work programme and use the discussion to inform the LGA annual conference digital session.

### **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.