

Meeting: People and Places Board

Date: 10 January 2023



Digital Connectivity Update

Purpose of report

For information

Summary

This paper provides an overview of recent policy and public affairs work relating to digital connectivity and inclusion. It also provides background to the commissioned work David Mack-Smith of DMS Research and Consulting has carried out exploring the role of local authorities in tackling digital exclusion. At the Board meeting David will present the recommendations for both local and central government and Cllr Mark Hawthorne (the LGA's digital champion) will also be in attendance to provide his expertise. There will be an opportunity for a wider discussion with Board members about the recommendations and how the LGA can take them forward to lobby government.

Is this report confidential? No

Recommendation/s

Members are invited to:

- Note recent policy and public affairs activity in relation to digital connectivity and inclusion since the start of the 2022/23 board cycle.
- Note and discuss with David of DMS Research and Consulting and Cllr Mark Hawthorne the recommendations from the commissioned work on the role of local authorities tackling digital exclusion.
- Comment on how the LGA can take the recommendations forward and land them with Government.

Action/s

Noting comments from Members from the discussion with DMS Consulting and Cllr Mark Hawthorne, officers will publish the commissioned work exploring the role of local authorities in tackling digital exclusion and create a more detailed plan to take the recommendations forward and land them with central government.

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Digital Connectivity Update

Background

1. Officers continue to take forward public affairs and policy work relating to digital connectivity and inclusion, working with Cllr Mark Hawthorne, the LGA's digital champion.
2. On 7 September 2022 it was announced that Julia Lopez would be appointed Minister of State at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Julia was reconfirmed as Minister of State with the arrival of Rishi Sunak's government.
3. Since the start of the 2022/23 board cycle the LGA has [responded](#) to the Chancellor's Autumn Statement by calling on the government and industry to build internal expertise and put in place local digital champions to assist roll outs. The LGA has also [responded](#) to government's plans to expand the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme and [responded](#) to a recent survey by Which? showing households eligible for broadband social tariffs are not taking up the offer over concerns the speed offered will be too slow.
4. On 24 November 2022 the LGA held a session on the role of local authorities supporting digital connectivity. The session was chaired by Cllr Mark Hawthorne and speakers included Gemma Bristow (digital specialist at South Hams District Council and West Devon Borough Council), Ceren Clulow (digital connectivity manager at Nottinghamshire County Council), Gareth Elliott (director of policy and communications at Mobile UK), and Jesam Eyong (head of public sector engagement at DCMS).
5. The session was well attended with around forty representatives from local government and wider organisations. It explored the role local government and its partners play in improving local infrastructure and the difference local authority digital champions make to local broadband and mobile delivery.
6. Officers continue to raise concern about the impact of upgrading infrastructure. The planned transfer of all analogue lines (also called public switched telephone network or PSTN) to digital internet-based infrastructure will see analogue-based products 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 people who rely on technology enabled care at the most risk.

7. Officers continue to run monthly [switchover working group](#) meetings to discuss challenges and share good practice between regions. The results from an LGA commissioned digital switchover readiness survey reconfirmed the four areas where councils need better support: safe data sharing, funding, communications support, and with the central testing platform. Cllr Hawthorne continues to attend the meetings and officers are now working with the LGA communications team to design tools to raise awareness of the switchover within local authorities and wider communities.
8. The LGA is working with Ofcom to develop a survey which will be distributed in the new year to understand how ready councils are for the 2G and 3G switch off (taking place between 2023 and 2033). There is concern that the most vulnerable will be disproportionately affected and officers will be working with Ofcom to provide more targeted support once the results are analysed.

Digital inclusion commission

9. In March 2022 members agreed to expand the Board's digital work to cover digital inclusion which will be crucial to addressing social and economic inequalities and levelling up every community.
10. Rural areas face specific challenges associated with being excluded from accessing digital services and products. 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 such as libraries and community venues. Additional challenges associated with disability, older age and low income are compounded in rural areas. Tinder Foundation's Rural Action Research found underrepresented groups living in rural areas are more likely to suffer from increased social isolation.
11. Following a steer from members and recognition that digital exclusion remains an important issue for many local communities and in the delivery of council services, officers commissioned DMS Consulting to undertake a piece of work to help inform the LGA's lobbying positions. The research aimed to explore the links between various types of disadvantage and the availability and usage of digital infrastructure, and to consider the role of councils in tackling digital exclusion.
12. To date, the supplier has analysed the link between digital infrastructure and disadvantage and carried out a series of stakeholder consultations including with six councils (Bolsover District Council, Devon County Council, Gloucestershire County Council, Leeds City Council, Norfolk County Council and Nottinghamshire County Council), DCMS, Building Digital UK (BDUK), the Digital Connectivity Forum (DCF),

and the Good Things Foundation. The discussions explored the role that councils can play in tackling digital exclusion and how central government could better support and leverage councils in this.

13. A series of recommendations have been developed aimed at both central and local government. DMS Consulting held a session on 15 December 2022 to discuss the draft recommendations with a series of stakeholders including Cllr Mark Hawthorne.
14. David Mack-Smith of DMS Research and Consulting will attend the January board and present the findings and recommendations to members for comment. Following approval from members officers will launch the report and create a plan for landing the recommendations with central government to enhance the board's lobbying positions.

Next steps

15. Members are invited to:

- Note recent policy and public affairs activity in relation to digital connectivity and inclusion since the start of the 2022/23 board cycle.
- Note and discuss with David of DMS Research and Consulting and Cllr Mark Hawthorne the recommendations from the commissioned work on the role of local authorities tackling digital exclusion.
- Comment on how the LGA can take the recommendations forward and land them with Government.

Implications for Wales

16. Digital infrastructure policy is a devolved responsibility. The commissioned work only analyses data for England, however officers will look for opportunities to ensure alignment of recommendations and messaging with the Welsh Local Government Association.

Financial Implications

17. The Board's activities are supported by budgets for policy development and improvement. The research has been funded from the Board's budget for policy development.