

## Digital Update

### Purpose of Report

For information.

Is this report confidential? No

### Summary

This report provides an update for People and Places Members on the board's digital work over the 2022/23 cycle. LGA Digital Champion, Cllr Mark Hawthorne will attend the meeting to have a wider discussion with Members about the digital agenda.

LGA Plan Theme: ***Stronger local economies, thriving local democracy***

### Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to note the digital inclusion, connectivity, switchover, and engagement work undertaken through the 2022/23 board cycle. Cllr Mark Hawthorne will attend the Board meeting to have a wider discussion with Members about the digital agenda and areas of priority for the 2023/24 cycle.

### Contact details

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### Background

1. The Board has continued to expand its work around digital connectivity and inclusion throughout the 2022/23 cycle. The paper provides an update for Members on the Board's digital workstreams.

### Digital inclusion

2. Following a competitive bidding process, the Board commissioned DMS Research and Consulting to explore the role of councils in tackling digital exclusion. The research formed two parts – data analysis and stakeholder consultations. The data analysis combined Ofcom Connected Nations datasets for coverage and performance with over a hundred socio-economic datasets to explore the correlations between thousands of variables to understand how connectivity has changed over time. Following this several stakeholder consultations were undertaken with council officers and members, the Department for Science Innovation and Technology (DSIT), Building Digital UK (BDUK), the Digital Connectivity Forum and Good Things Foundation.
3. The [final report](#) outlines a number of recommendations for Government. These include: the need to clarify ministerial and executive leadership on digital inclusion, bearing in mind the cross-cutting nature of the issue; creating and maintaining a new framework with national level guidance, resources and tools that support local digital inclusion initiatives, replacing the Digital Inclusion Strategy of 2014; and developing mechanisms for more effective cross-department coordination in tackling digital exclusion.
4. The report also recommends the LGA consider making an online digital inclusion dashboard tool available to councils, such that they can benchmark their areas' position relative to their peers by various relevant metrics. LGA officers are working with the LGA's research team, digital and cyber team, and the Digital Poverty Alliance to create this resource using the LGA's data benchmarking tool, [LG Inform](#).

5. Helen Milner, Chief Executive of Good Things Foundation has written a [think piece](#) endorsing the report's recommendations and reinforcing the important role councils play in addressing digital exclusion and the need for Government to work with the sector and wider organisations to create impact at scale to fix the digital divide.
6. Cllr Mark Hawthorne, the LGA's Digital Champion, has written to Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure at DSIT, Julia Lopez MP, sharing the report, highlighting the recommendations for Government, and asking for a meeting to discuss the findings in further detail (see Appendix 1). A [press release](#) was distributed highlighting the report and has received [national coverage](#) from a number of outlets. Officers will keep Members up to date with developments.

## Digital connectivity

7. Continuing to highlight the importance of improved digital connectivity has remained at the forefront of the Board's work programme throughout the 2022/23 cycle. The Board's longstanding call for Government to recognise the importance of local authority digital champions to help coordinate delivery locally, recruit extra capacity and respond to surges in local roll out activity was recognised in Government's recently published [UK Wireless Infrastructure Strategy](#).
8. While this was strongly welcomed by the LGA, the strategy has wider implications for local government and members might wish to consider how the Board engages with DSIT around the following areas over the forthcoming months:
  - 8.1 The strategy states a Rural Connectivity Champion will be appointed who will report to DSIT and the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) Secretaries of State to remove local barriers for deployment and promote digitally based innovation in rural areas. At the time of writing no one has been appointed to the position. Once the Rural Connectivity Champion is in post the Board might like to ask for a meeting with Cllr Mark Hawthorne as the LGA's Digital Champion to discuss how the Board can support the role working in partnership with the postholder as well as outline areas of concern related to rural connectivity.

8.2 A Digital Infrastructure Advisory Group has been proposed in the strategy comprising a selection of regional digital leaders to advise the government on how places can act to promote investment in and adoption of digital connectivity. We will look to work with Government to ensure the group does not duplicate the well-established ADEPT Digital Connectivity Working Group, a task and finish group focussing on the delivery of improved broadband and mobile connectivity with membership comprising local government digital leads across the country.

8.3 The strategy outlines £40 million will be provided for regions and local authorities across the UK to establish themselves as '5G Innovation Regions' to promote innovation and growth through investment in, and scaled adoption of, 5G and other advanced wireless technologies by business and public services. There are concerns from the sector this will be a time consuming and resource intensive bidding process since it is running at the same time as other similar competitions, a lack of clarity around messaging, and access to 5G puts rural areas at a disadvantage. LGA officers have shared concerns with DSIT officials and will review in the next Board cycle how we can influence this work going forward.

8.4 The strategy recognises the need to improve the measurement and reporting of mobile coverage, a longstanding ask of the People and Places Board. It highlights that it is 'frustrating when a user's experience does not match up to expectations and the reported coverage' and as a result the strategy calls on Ofcom to improve mobile coverage reporting, including in rural areas. Cllr Hawthorne and LGA officers are meeting with DSIT's mobile coverage team to understand how the Department intends to work with Ofcom to improve reporting and ensure local government plays a leading role influencing the outcomes of the strategy.

9. The Board is planning a session at the LGA's annual conference in July titled '[growing an inclusive digital economy](#)'. It will look at the role of councils and national partners in improving local connectivity, digital skills, using assets and systems to support better access to digital services and targeted inclusion programmes. Councillor Mark Hawthorne is confirmed to chair the session and Lord Clement-Jones confirmed as a speaker. At the time of writing, officers are waiting to hear back from Lucy Powell MP and John Whittingdale MP's offices.

## Digital switchovers

10. Officers continue to raise concerns about the impact of upgrading infrastructure. The planned transfer of all analogue lines (also called the 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.
11. Throughout the 2022/23 Board cycle officers have continued to run monthly [switchover working group](#) meetings to discuss challenges and share good practice between regions. Officers have updated the LGA's [digital switchover hub](#) in collaboration with partners providing information for the sector and have also recently developed a [communications toolkit](#). The toolkit contains assets aimed at residents to raise awareness of the upcoming switchover. A printable leaflet template with information for those who are digitally excluded has also been developed. To date, the online assets have over 15,000 impressions on social media, 140 likes and shares and there have been 220 individual link clicks on the resources.
12. The LGA undertook a [digital switchover readiness survey](#) exploring councils' awareness, planning and implementation of the digital switchover. The results were published in early 2023. The sector remains particularly concerned about social care and telecare users being approached by scammers and officers are working alongside officers in the LGA's safer and stronger communities' team and the National Trading Standards Scams Team to support the sector with information dissemination.
13. The 2G/3G sunset whereby all operators have agreed to switch off 2G and 3G by 2033 is a rising concern for the sector with some providers already switching off their 3G networks. A lack of communications from industry remains a key challenge, with awareness levels low. The LGA's research team have developed a survey to explore potential implications of the switch off for the sector. The survey will run over the next month and its results will be used to inform the Board's lobbying position in the 2023/24 cycle.

## Stakeholder engagement

14. LGA Digital Champion, Cllr Mark Hawthorne, has been invited to represent the People and Places Board on the newly formed National Connectivity Alliance, an alliance of telecoms providers, infrastructure providers, landowners, professional advisers and wider stakeholders to discuss the importance of delivering world class connectivity for all.
15. Cllr Hawthorne also sits on the Digital Connectivity Forum (Government's primary advisory group on the provision of seamless digital connectivity) and its digital infrastructure working group representing the People and Places Board.
16. Officers meet regularly with key digital stakeholders including DSIT stakeholder engagement officers, Mobile UK, Which?, Ofcom, Openreach, Good Things Foundation and the ADEPT Digital Connectivity Working Group.

## Proposals

17. Members are asked to note the digital inclusion, connectivity, switchover, and engagement work undertaken through the 2022/23 board cycle and Cllr Mark Hawthorne will attend the meeting to have a wider discussion with Members about the digital agenda and areas of priority for the 2023/24 cycle.
18. Areas the Board might like to prioritise in the next cycle include:
  - influencing the practical outcomes of the Wireless Infrastructure Strategy, including working with Ofcom to improve the accuracy of reporting of network performance levels in rural areas
  - expanding the digital switchover work to explore the impact of the 2G/3G sunset
  - aligning more closely with the work of the City Regions Board to tackle issues around digital exclusion while still being the leading voice of rural-specific challenges.

## Implications for Wales

19. Digital infrastructure policy is a devolved responsibility. However, officers will look for opportunities to ensure alignment of work with the Welsh Local Government Association.

## Financial Implications

20. The Board's digital activities are supported by budgets for policy development and improvement. The digital inclusion research was funded from the Board's budget for policy development.

## Equalities implications

21. The Board's work considers the impact of digital exclusion on marginalised communities and groups with protected characteristics, and it continues to lobby Government to ensure emerging digital policies and programmes will meet the needs of individuals and communities nationally and at a regional and local level across England.

## Appendix 1 – Cllr Mark Hawthorne letter to the Minister

Julia Lopez MP  
Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure  
Department for Science, Innovation and Technology  
100 Parliament Street  
London  
SW1A 2BQ

12 May 2023

Dear Julia,

I am writing as the Local Government Association's Digital Champion to bring to your attention a recently completed report exploring the links between various types of disadvantage and the availability and usage of digital infrastructure, the role of councils in tackling digital exclusion, and suggesting a series of opportunities for Government to support and leverage councils in this.

We welcome the recent publication of your department's UK Wireless Infrastructure Strategy and commitment to deliver world-class digital infrastructure for all. Our report finds there is still some way to go ensuring every part of the country can have future-proofed, gigabit capable connections which can open the door to greater life and opportunities and ensure future growth. There's an important role for central and local government to work in partnership to co-design this.

In summary, the key recommendations from the report for Government are as follows:



- **Clarify ministerial and executive leadership on digital inclusion, bearing in mind the cross-cutting nature of this issue** – It is widely recognised that tackling digital exclusion effectively can make an important contribution to various national policy objectives, including improving economic activity rates, improving the efficiency of public service delivery, reducing pressures on the health and social care system and improving health outcomes, and widening the pool of talent available to digital industries. However, it is an issue that spans several different departments, and it is not currently clear who, if anyone, at ministerial and senior officer level has responsibility for coordinating the UK Government's approach. Clarifying this leadership would be helpful in ensuring that the resources applied to digital inclusion efforts are used as effectively and efficiently as possible.
- **Create and maintain a new framework with national-level guidance, resources and tools that support local digital inclusion initiatives, replacing the Digital Inclusion Strategy of 2014** – The current UK Digital Inclusion Strategy dates from 2014 and does not now appear to be actively shaping local approaches. However, the fundamental nature of the barriers to digital inclusion are similar throughout the UK and national-level frameworks and guidance could and should play a part in optimising the effectiveness of digital inclusion initiatives. Councils are well-placed to help tackle digital exclusion and are keen to continue playing a major role in doing so, but severe funding pressures make it difficult to protect non-statutory activities. They need support from central government to ensure that local digital inclusion initiatives are continued and enhanced. A new framework could objectively assess and provide guidance on how best practice in this area, how best to integrate digital inclusion with other local strategies, and how to leverage PSTN switch off as a digital inclusion opportunity.
- **Develop mechanisms for more effective cross-department coordination in tackling digital exclusion** – In addition to DSIT, departments with an active interest in improving digital inclusion include DHSC improving the use of digital channels for access to health services and exploiting telecare and health, DfE's work on digital skills and resources for children and adults, DWP supporting digital skills and resources for job-seekers and benefit claimants, DLUHC improving efficiency of council service delivery and support for vulnerable groups and BEIS digital upskilling for small businesses. Developing more explicit and effective mechanisms for coordinating departments' efforts should help to reduce duplication and improve the synergies between activities (for example ensuring that initiatives around improving access to devices and/or connectivity are complemented with help on digital skills).

6 June 2023

A copy of the full report is attached to this letter and I would welcome that you and your department give serious consideration in the development of forthcoming digital strategies working in partnership with local government.

I would appreciate a meeting to discuss the report and recommendations in further detail, if convenient.

Yours sincerely

Cllr Mark Hawthorne