Digital Update

Purpose of Report
For direction.

Is this report confidential? No

Summary

This report provides People and Places board members with an update on the board's digital work over the 2022/23 cycle ahead of a wider discussion with the LGA's Digital Champion, Cllr Mark Hawthorne, about areas of priority for the upcoming board cycle.

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

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to **note** the policy context and the overview of work undertaken by the People and Places Board in the 2022/23 board cycle.

Members are also asked to **provide a steer** on the priorities for the 2023/24 in **paragraph 32**.

Members are asked to nominate a digital lead to act as a conduit between the work of the board and Cllr Hawthorne's wider work as the LGA's Digital Champion, providing regular updates at board meetings.

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Background

0. The board continued to expand its work around digital connectivity and inclusion throughout the 2022/23 cycle, following the [Levelling Up White Paper](#) setting out Government's targets that by 2030 the UK will have nationwide gigabit-capable broadband and 4G coverage, with 5G coverage for the majority of the population. This paper provides an update for members on the board's digital workstreams and sets out some early thinking on artificial intelligence (AI). The update will be presented by Cllr Mark Hawthorne the LGA's Digital Champion.

1. Cllr Mark Hawthorne is Leader of Gloucestershire County Council and a member of the LGA's Economy and Resources Board. Cllr Hawthorne is the current LGA Digital Champion, shaping future LGA digital policy, working in partnership with the People and Places Board and attending relevant meetings with digital stakeholders both with board members and on behalf of the board.

2. Following a steer from Lead Members to have a named People and Places board member with responsibility for the LGA's digital work, members are asked to nominate a digital lead to work closely with Cllr Hawthorne on the 2023/24 digital work programme.

Broadband

Gigabit Rollout

3. Councils play a leading role in supporting digital connectivity and are best placed to understand the digital needs of their areas. They supported the delivery of the Superfast Broadband Programme, providing almost £750 million of the £1.7 billion invested and have built up a pool of internal expertise to help facilitate both roll-out and take-up.

4. The current broadband rollout, Project Gigabit, is centrally managed by Building Digital UK (BDUK). Due to the scale and centralised management of this programme, the board took the decision to focus on highlighting the risks of not utilising the expertise of councils in targeting communities most in need, driving demand stimulation and providing digital upskilling rather than to push for a direct role in delivery.

5. The LGA's call for fully funded 'digital champions' captures these calls and has attracted support from across the mobile and broadband sector. As set out

below this is something the LGA proposes to continue to push for throughout the 2023/24 cycle.

Digital phone switchover

6. 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.

7. In the 22/23 Board cycle, 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. Officers have continued to run monthly [switchover working group](#) meetings to discuss challenges and share good practice between regions.

8. The LGA's [digital switchover hub](#) has been updated in collaboration with industry and Government partners and the LGA has recently developed a [digital switchover toolkit](#). The toolkit contains assets aimed at residents to raise awareness of the upcoming switchover. The assets include draft social media posts, text to include in bulletins or on a website, and three versions of a printable A4 leaflet with easy-to-understand information and directions. Officers continue to encourage key stakeholders to share the assets and, in response to this work, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) has asked the LGA to support with the development of guidance for local authorities on the digital phone switchover.

9. The transition from analogue to digital technologies has created new opportunities for criminals to target vulnerable residents. For example, criminals may use phishing emails, fake websites, or phone calls to trick residents into providing personal information. There is also the potential for increases in criminality through rogue traders selling equipment, charging for unnecessary work, or trying to pressurise vulnerable members of the community into new contracts related to the digital switchover. Officers have been working with colleagues in the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Team and the National Trading Standards Scams Team to create recommended actions for councils to reduce the risk of scams. The guidance will be hosted on the Digital Switchover Hub in early autumn, and it is accompanied by case studies.

Mobile

2G/3G sunset

10. The 2G/3G sunset, whereby all mobile operators have agreed to switch off 2G and 3G by 2033, is a rising concern for the sector as it will affect residents on networks using older mobile devices and services. By retiring 3G and 2G, the radio frequencies can be repurposed for faster, more energy-efficient 4G and 5G services. Each mobile provider is setting its own timetable for its 3G network switch off and Vodafone has already started turning off 3G. Those with older devices that do not allow 4G or 5G will have to upgrade to continue to access mobile data and there are concerns that some devices, particularly those being sold from a third-party seller (such as online marketplaces or in a supermarket), might not support the 4G network. Other devices such as care alarms, security alarms and payment terminals might also use the 3G network and therefore could be affected by the switch off.

11. A lack of communications from industry remains a key challenge, with public awareness levels low, and concerns remain around affordability of new devices. As a result, the LGA's research team has developed a survey to explore potential implications of the switch off for the sector. The survey has been running for the last month and will close mid-September. Its results will be used to inform the board's lobbying position in the 2023/24 cycle. LGA officers and LGA Digital Champion Cllr Mark Hawthorne continue to engage with key stakeholders on the issue, meeting with the DSIT leads, Ofcom, and the mobile operators' body Mobile UK on a regular basis.

Mobile coverage

12. Government's UK Wireless Infrastructure Strategy, published earlier this year, 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.

13. Cllr Hawthorne and LGA officers met with DSIT's mobile coverage team earlier this summer to understand how the Department intends to work with Ofcom to improve reporting. While conversations are still in preliminary stages, it was agreed the LGA would be involved in shaping the work and officers will ensure local government plays a leading role influencing the wider outcomes of the strategy.

5G

14. The Levelling Up White Paper outlined the Government's ambition for most of the population to have access to a 5G signal by 2027. The subsequent Wireless Infrastructure Strategy highlighted the role the 5G Testbeds and Trials (5GTT) programme played in highlighting the benefits that 5G can bring. Building on this, the strategy set out a £40 million fund for regions and local authorities across the UK to establish themselves as '5G Innovation Regions' to promote innovation through investment in, and scaled adoption of, 5G and other advanced wireless technologies. Given the importance of good mobile connectivity in rural areas officers will continue to work with DSIT to ensure the benefits and challenges of rolling out 5G to more remote communities are fully explored.

Masts

15. The installation of telecoms infrastructure would normally count as development and require planning permission. However, communications network operators have certain permitted development rights. These are rights to make specified changes to a building or land without the need to apply for planning permission from the local planning authority.

16. As of April 2022, new ground-based mobile masts up to 30 metres in non-protected areas and up to 25 metres in protected areas are permitted. Regardless of whether planning permission is required, operators need to obtain agreement from the landowner to build mobile masts on private land. Further changes include buildings able to host smaller masts in unprotected areas without prior approval and reduce need to build new masts and existing mobile masts strengthened without prior approval so they can be upgraded for 5G and shared between mobile operators. The full list of changes to the permitted development rights can be found here.

17. Officers will continue to engage with the 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 to understand any implications for the sector and feed this back to DSIT and industry.

Digital leadership

Inclusion

18. 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 (DCF) and Good Things Foundation.

19. The final report, published in the last board cycle, outlined a number of recommendations for Government. These included: 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.

20. Cllr Mark Hawthorne wrote to the 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 and officers are following up securing a meeting with the Minister with DSIT officials. A press release was published and picked up by the national and trade press.

21. There are growing calls for Government to publish an updated Digital Inclusion Strategy. Helen Milner, Chief Executive of Good Things Foundation wrote 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. The House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee published a report in June which found Government has 'no credible strategy' on tackling digital exclusion. The LGA submitted evidence to inform the report and responded to its publication with a press release.

Digital champions

22. There is also growing support for the board's longstanding call for Government to recognise the importance of, and fully fund, local authority digital champions to help coordinate delivery locally, recruit extra capacity and respond to surges in local roll out activity. Government's recently published UK Wireless Infrastructure Strategy recognises the role of digital champions and digital coordinators to provide strategic leadership on the local authority's digital infrastructure strategy. Mobile UK published research suggesting local authorities which have prioritised digital connectivity and appointed digital champions have had significant success in speeding up rollout and improving relationships with telecoms companies.

23. Most recently the Digital Connectivity Forum published a report looking at the role of local authorities as connectivity enablers. The report recommended Government allocates funding to local authorities to support the role of a digital champion with a mandated job description/skills level to ensure consistency across all local authorities. Cllr Hawthorne and officers will continue to algin calls with the DCF and Mobile UK and lobby Government over the 2023/24 board cycle.

Wireless Infrastructure Strategy

24. The UK Wireless Infrastructure Strategy introduced Simon Fell MP as Government's Rural Connectivity Champion reporting to both 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. Cllr Mark Hawthorne met with Simon Fell in August to discuss how the sector can work in partnership to support the role and outlined the LGA's key digital asks. Simon Fell is bringing a paper to the DEFRA and DSIT Secretaries of State in the autumn suggesting key short, medium, and long-term priorities for Government to support rural communities with digital connectivity and the conversation with Cllr Hawthorne helped inform this piece of work.

25. It is suggested the board invites Simon Fell to a future meeting to understand his key priorities, discuss the challenges facing rural areas, and highlight the role of local government in improving rural connectivity.

26. The UK Wireless Infrastructure Strategy also proposed a Digital Infrastructure Advisory Group, comprising a selection of regional digital leaders to advise

Government on how places can act to promote investment in and adoption of digital connectivity. Officers are currently working with DSIT to ensure the group does not duplicate the well-established ADEPT Digital Connectivity Working Group (see para 18).

Artificial Intelligence

27. In 2019, the LGA's Research team explored the <u>sector's use of predictive analytics</u>. It was found that the use of this technology was at an early stage, and there were challenges with councils' understanding of artificial intelligence (AI) and/or predictive analytics. Since 2019 there have been significant technological developments, especially recently in the field of generative AI. These tools are now widely accessible and include large language models (for example Chat GPT). With these technological developments, like many organisations globally, councils are starting to consider and make use of AI in a broader number of contexts including cyber security, software development, in translation services, through virtual assistants and productivity tools.

28. Work on AI is already taking place across the LGA, including by the Cyber Digital and Technology (CDT), Research, Leadership and Localism, Partners in Care and Health, and Policy teams. The remit of the LGA's Innovation and Improvement Board extends to cyber, digital, data and technology and the board has been leading on the LGA's work on AI to date, responding to a Government consultation on <u>'A Pro-Innovation Approach to AI Regulation'</u>. Officers will ensure join-up between LGA Boards and bring updates on the LGA's wider work on AI to the People and Places Board where appropriate.

29. At the same time there is an opportunity for the People and Places Board to play a leading role in this agenda. The sector is enthusiastic about the opportunities AI presents in both increasing council capacity and providing intelligence and insights that will improve public services. There is also a risk that if councils do not use AI, they would fail to meet resident expectations and that local government could be left behind. To date the Improvement and Innovation Board have begun to consider the risks associated with AI and the need to manage them as well as the digital ethics of the deployment of AI and how councils can embed this within governance structures and project management processes. The potential for AI in developing insight and intelligence to strengthen decision-making in local public services is enormous and therefore there is an opportunity for the People and Places Board to complement the work of the Improvement and Innovation Board with wider place-based work.

Members might like to consider exploring how AI is used in political decision-making, considering both opportunities and risks.

30. Members are encouraged to reflect upon their own uses and understanding of AI within their local authorities and provide a steer on whether they might like to jointly pursue a piece of commissioned work with the Improvement and Innovation Board to support councillors in this area.

Proposals

31. Members are asked to note the background information and digital work undertaken through the 2022/23 board cycle. Members are also asked to provide a steer on whether they agree with prioritising the following key areas in the 2023/24 cycle:

    - The board uses the results of the 2G/3G sunset survey to inform its lobbying position and develop support for the sector, joining up with its work on the digital phone switchover.

    - Government's Rural Connectivity Champion, Simon Fell MP, is invited to a future board meeting to set out his key priorities, discuss the challenges facing rural areas, and the role of local government in improving rural connectivity.

    - A new workstream is developed around AI, including commissioned work exploring the role of AI in political decision-making, following a steer from members.

    - The board continues to engage government and key stakeholders on its established priorities, including: digital inclusion; local authority digital champions; and, access to high-speed digital connectivity in rural areas.

32. Members are asked to nominate a digital lead to act as a conduit between the work of the board and Cllr Hawthorne's wider work as the LGA's Digital Champion, providing regular updates at board meetings.

Next steps

33. Following a steer from members around whether they are happy with the proposed digital work in the 2023/24 board cycle, officers will take forward the work stream.

Implications for Wales

34. Digital infrastructure policy is a devolved responsibility. However, officers will look for opportunities to ensure alignment of work with the Welsh Local Government Association, such as around the digital PSTN switchover.

Financial Implications

35. The Board's digital activities are supported by budgets for policy development and improvement.

Equalities implications

36. 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 in England.