Broadband and the digital divide

Purpose

For discussion and direction.

Summary

This paper sets out proposals for the Board's work programme on broadband and the digital divide over 2015/2016.

Recommendation

That the Board discuss the work programme on broadband and the digital divide, and steer officers on the suitability of the actions suggested **in paragraphs 7 and 14.**

Action

Officers to take forward as directed by members.

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Broadband and the digital divide

1. This paper is intended to set the context for a discussion on superfast broadband and the digital divide in the UK, and asks for Members' steer on a three-phased project to cover the Board's work in this area over 2015/16.

Background

2. It is well established that digital infrastructure is vital for supporting growth, especially in non-metropolitan areas given the employment and business patterns in those geographies, and the importance of the visitor economy. It also makes communication between citizens, businesses and public agencies easier in more sparsely populated areas and is a key driver of wider public service transformation.

3. Councils have played a vital role in the extension of access to superfast broadband through the publicly funded rollout. They are also joining-up this work with efforts to encourage people and businesses to get online, and are facilitating wider public service transformation by making more services accessible online including Universal Credit and components of health and social care integration.

4. Over the past year, the public money invested in the superfast broadband market has seen provision improve across England. However, whilst the average national coverage figure rises, there are underlying and profound inequalities in coverage and speeds between different areas. This sees some council areas where superfast coverage has reached over 95% of premises compared to others where up to 30% cannot achieve the same superfast speeds. This is even more pronounced at ward level where in some cases whole villages can be cut off from superfast speeds. This digital divide, mainly between urban and rural areas, could become even more significant in the near future if hard to reach areas are excluded from the Government's ambition to rollout ultrafast broadband of at least 100Mbps to premises across the country.

5. Intelligence from our membership has suggested that councils are increasingly dissatisfied with the current BT-led deployment model and its associated technologies, which they argue are ill suited to the roll out of superfast broadband to hard to reach rural areas. As the first and second roll out phases edge closer to completion, the sector is approaching a crucial milestone in its efforts to achieve 100% superfast broadband provision. The challenge the sector now faces is how to achieve universal coverage in a post-BT model context.

6. In this policy area over the past year the People and Places Board have:

    6.1. strengthened the LGA's ability to influence Broadband Delivery UK (BD UK) by forging a productive relationship with the new Chief Executive, Chris Townsend;
    6.2. set out a compelling vision for the importance of digital technology to driving economic growth and service transformation in the LGA response to the Government's consultation on Future Digital Communications Infrastructure Needs and via Select Committee responses throughout the year;
    6.3. commissioned a report from The Non-Metropolitan Commission which reinforced the Members' view that we need a radical overhaul of the current funding and commercial model for broadband; and

6.4. steered officers to work with the Planning Advisory Service to produce a guide for councils on BD UK's Mobile Infrastructure Project to assist with the rollout and the balancing of economic and social benefits with the environmental impact.

7. This upcoming Board cycle is an opportunity for members to build upon their work to date and influence the agenda to secure both value for money from future public investment in digital infrastructure and better connectivity for residents. **It is suggested the Board do this through a three-phased project. This would comprise:**

7.1. Firstly, a piece of work to take stock of current provision and evaluate the success of the publicly funded Broadband rollout and the Government's Mobile Infrastructure Project;
7.2. Secondly, undertaking a horizon scanning exercise to understand and model potential ways forward; and
7.3. Thirdly, carrying out an exploration of the wider benefits of digital transformation in non-metropolitan areas to make the case for parity of Government investment with cities to encourage and support digital innovation in rural areas.

Taking stock of current provision and evaluating the rollout's success

8. In the short term, it is proposed that officers conduct or commission out an evaluation of the current publicly-funded roll out of superfast broadband provision in non-metropolitan areas as well as the progress of the Government's Mobile Infrastructure Project, including an assessment of what has been achieved so far, and whether it has delivered what is was expected to. This could be undertaken through:

8.1. A qualitative approach via a confidential survey sent to local government stakeholders. There is also possibility of partnering with appropriate professional bodies to undertake this research. Further analysis could be undertaken through focus groups of officers from key roll out areas.
8.2. A review of published data on broadband speeds could also be conducted to provide an assessment of coverage across non-metropolitan areas, beyond the Government's national average figures.
8.3. A member-facing campaign encouraging councillors to submit internet speed results from the areas they represent. Using the data from these results the LGA could commission data visualisation specialists to design an infographic, build a "councillors' map of broadband speeds" across England or create another equivalent engaging design.

9. The outputs from this first phase of activity would:

9.1. inform LGA lobbying activity, including a piece of work to reflect back to government and BDUK what has worked well during the roll out and where lessons could be learnt;
9.2. engage a wide range of members in an LGA campaign on broadband and build the our presence around this issue throughout the year;
9.3. influence the second phase of work to understand and model potential ways forward.

Understanding and modelling potential ways forward

10. Following this first phase of work, in the short to medium term it is proposed that officers undertake a horizon scanning exercise to assess how the sector can facilitate the roll out of digital infrastructure in a "post-BT" world. This could include:

    10.1. exploring the different technologies available;
    10.2. assessing the current status of the procurement market and what this would mean for roll out;
    10.3. considering and modelling what the devolution of digital infrastructure funding might look like; and
    10.4. considering how best councils can secure value for money from future investment.

11. It is proposed that this phase of work could deliver a set of tools to support councils engaging in a new phase of broadband roll out to hard to reach areas.

Understanding the wider benefits of digital transformation

12. Following on from these two phases of work, in the longer term, it is proposed that officers build on work undertaken by the Improvement and Innovation Board[i] to study the efficiencies and improvements to public services that have been achieved so far in rural areas through better digital connectivity. This could take the form of:

    12.1. Case studies from non-metropolitan areas; a range of online resources; and media releases outlining how councils are benefiting from better connected residents and infrastructure.

13. This work could help inform and support LGA lobbying activity to make the case for parity of Government investment with cities to encourage and support digital innovation in rural areas. Activity would include engaging with Ministers, BD UK officials and parliamentarians.

Timescales

14. Once members have provided a steer, officers will look fully scope out timescales with outputs from the first phase ready in Spring 2016 when contracts and re-procurement processes are beginning to take place.

Next steps

15. **Members are invited to comment upon, and agree, the draft broadband programme for 2015/16.**

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[i] LGA - Transforming public services using digital tools - http://tinyurl.com/ptg25sx