

A councillor's guide to digital connectivity

Guidance

Introduction

Digital connectivity is an all-encompassing term used to describe mobile or fixed connections to the internet. Being connected in this way has become part of the fabric of everyday life – as important to communities and businesses as a water, gas or electricity connection.

With better access to high speed and reliable broadband and mobile connections, local communities can access public services more conveniently and purchase goods online at a lower cost. People can work from home, cutting out their commute and improving their quality of life. Businesses can grow, become more productive, sell their products in a global market and access a raft of services not available to those offline. Tourists can find out more information about local attractions and share photographs of their experiences with friends and on social media. In contrast, areas stuck in the digital slow lane are less attractive places to live, work and visit, and risk being left behind as other areas reap the benefits of our digital revolution.

At the national level, the Government has set out its ambitions to build ‘a world-class digital infrastructure’ and has committed to rolling out nationwide full fibre broadband¹ coverage by 2033 and increase geographic mobile coverage to 95 per cent of the UK by 2022. However, the job of connecting the UK is far from complete.

While most people in the UK are connected to a basic broadband connection (defined later in this guide), there remain too many communities where streaming a movie at home or even sending pictures to friends and family via email is considered a luxury.

These poorly connected areas aren’t just in out of the way hamlets deep in the countryside. Some inner-city areas such as Rotherhithe, in London, Deansgate in Manchester and the Baltic Triangle in Liverpool, have average speeds well below the Government’s minimum aspiration.

Similarly, while many parts of the country take for granted the existence of ever-present, high-quality mobile connectivity, there are significant gaps in coverage. These gaps are usually found in rural communities, where residents suffer from partial mobile coverage, where not all mobile network operators cover an area, or ‘not spots’, where a mobile phone will not be able to make a call on any network.

¹ A connection that can achieve download speeds of up to 1 Gbps (with similar upload speeds)



As technology continues to evolve, it is vital that all local areas have the digital infrastructure able to meet the demands of consumers and businesses both today and in the future.

This guide is structured to provide councillors with key information on digital connectivity. It explores the main issues and challenges facing our local areas and includes hints, tips and case studies from experienced councillors who have already undertaken work to get their communities better connected. It also provides a brief overview of Government policy and a glossary of widely used terms. Finally, it sets out the vital role councillors can play in this area by:

- **educating residents, voluntary and third-sector groups and businesses on the benefits of faster, more reliable connectivity**
- **bringing communities together to advocate for improved digital connectivity by applying for grants or aggregating their demand to persuade telecommunications providers to build the necessary infrastructure on their road**
- **helping residents consider where it is most appropriate to build new digital infrastructure, such as a phone mast, to improve residents' and businesses' connectivity whilst conserving local landscapes**
- **working in partnership with council portfolio holders, officers and other local stakeholders to consider the role your council can play in helping to improve communities' digital connectivity.**

For any queries relating to the guide please email localism@local.gov.uk.



Why digital connectivity matters

Digital connectivity is revolutionising people’s quality of life. According to research commissioned by the communications regulator Ofcom, in 2017 64 per cent of people said the internet was an essential part of their day to day life.

As more of us use faster broadband and mobile services we have more choice about how and when to make voice and video calls, message friends and relatives, browse the internet, watch on-demand TV, stream music, play games, do shopping or work from home.

It is equally important for businesses too. Research by the Federation of Small Businesses found that 94 per cent of small business owners rate a reliable broadband connection as critical to the success of their business.² A survey conducted by the Confederation of British Industry found that 81 per cent of firms also said that they see more reliable mobile connectivity as essential.

We know that improved digital connectivity increases innovation and productivity across the economy. Increased broadband speeds alone could add £17 billion to UK output by 2024.³ Studies have also shown mobile broadband is associated with positive impacts nationally, such as higher GDP and increased employment.⁴

The digitisation of public services also offers an important opportunity to support sustainable local services, especially in more remote settings with the public keen to use more services online.⁵ Of course, it is worth noting that not all residents will feel comfortable using digital services and therefore must be accommodated via other means.

Finally, better digital infrastructure can enable local government to fully utilise advances in technology and data analysis to better understand local areas and deliver services more effectively. The transformation of public sector assets such as lamp posts into “smart infrastructure” means they can now supply public access to wifi (explained later in this guide); support environmental monitoring such as air quality or flooding; or even monitor pedestrian flow or parking spaces.

² www.fsb.org.uk/standing-up-for-you/policy-issues/digital-economy/broadband-and-mobile-connectivity

³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/257006/UK_Broadband_Impact_Study_-_Impact_Report_-_Nov_2013_-_Final.pdf

⁴ www.mobileuk.org/cms-assets/The%20Impacts%20of%20Mobile%20Broadband%20&%205G.pdf

⁵ The Citizen View of Government Digital Transformation, Rural England, Ipsos Mori and Sopra Seria, 2017 – 89 per cent of residents say they are ready and willing to use additional digital services when they become available.

