

Digital Connectivity Working Group Update

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Date: Sept 2024

The ADEPT Digital Connectivity Working Group has met virtually on 25th Sept 2024 with representatives from local authorities across the country including Barnsley, Shropshire, Wolverhampton, Warwickshire, Cambridgeshire, Nottinghamshire, West Berkshire and North Northamptonshire also colleagues attended from LGA, DSIT and Mobile UK.

The meeting started with presentations from Commsworld, one of the leading internet service provider in UK, exploring opportunities around further enhancing digital connectivity for social housing by partnering with local authorities to offer subsidised internet packages and community Wi-Fi hubs. They could also support with launch of digital literacy programs to empower residents with essential online skills and collaborate on implementing smart housing solutions to improve energy efficiency and security. Additionally, investing in future-proof technologies like fibre and 5G, as well as offering affordable devices, would ensure residents have both access to connectivity and the tools to benefit from it, fostering greater digital inclusion.

The group had chance to have a discussion with colleagues from DSIT about recognized the role of telegraph poles in expanding digital connectivity, particularly in underserved rural areas. The deployment of poles often draws criticism due to their visual impact, but there are significant benefits that are often overlooked, such as reduced excavation, faster deployment, and the potential for carbon reduction. Given the increasing importance of these discussions, particularly as they pertain to both urban and rural communities, members of the group had the opportunity to explore how we can collectively address public concerns, improve community engagement, and promote a balanced understanding of the issues at hand. And how DSIT can further engage with this process and support a more coordinated approach among all stakeholders.

As part of its broader strategy to enhance broadband coverage, telegraph poles have been identified as a cost-effective solution for deploying fibre-optic cables to connect remote and difficult-to-reach locations. However, despite the government's push to utilize telegraph poles as a key part of its strategy for rolling out fibre broadband, some residents and local authorities have expressed concerns. These objections primarily revolve around the visual impact of poles on local landscapes, particularly in rural and heritage areas where the aesthetic value is high. Many residents argue that the installation of new poles could disrupt the character of villages or scenic regions, reducing the appeal of these areas. In some cases, homeowners fear that these structures could lower property values.

Local authorities share these concerns and, in some instances, have resisted permits for new poles, advocating for underground alternatives instead, which are less visually intrusive but significantly more expensive and slower to deploy. Furthermore, some local councils argue that telegraph poles could introduce safety risks or lead to disputes over land access.

This resistance highlights the tension between accelerating digital infrastructure and preserving local aesthetics, and it presents a challenge for the government in balancing community concerns with the need for nationwide connectivity.

The solution identified is adopting a communication strategy to educate communities as this would be a critical approach to addressing resistance to telegraph poles. The concerns residents have—about visual impact, property values, and safety—are valid, but many might not be fully aware of the benefits these poles can bring in terms of enhanced digital connectivity. A separate meeting will be arranged in the coming weeks between the group and DSIT to agree on the comms piece.

Lastly, Mobile UK, the voice of the UK's mobile network operators, has shared recent news and insights from the mobile industry. They have been actively engaging in key industry events and policy discussions in recent months. One significant focus has been the push for planning reform to accelerate the rollout of mobile infrastructure, particularly in the context of 5G and improving connectivity across rural and urban areas. They recently published a six-point planning framework calling for urgent reforms to remove delays and bottlenecks in mobile infrastructure projects, a critical step to meet the growing demands of a digital UK.

Gareth Elliott also provided a progress update on Shared Rural Network policy paper. The update recognised the substantial improvements to mobile coverage across the UK that have been delivered under the Partial Not Spot (PNS) element of the programme, with key highlights including:

- **94.9%** of the UK landmass now has coverage from at least one MNO
- “full” coverage areas have increased from 66% of the UK landmass at the start of 2020 to over **78% of the UK landmass** today. At the same time the scale of partial not spots have reduced from approximately 25% of the UK in 2020 to approximately 17% of the UK in July 2024
- the MNOs have collectively provided around **3.5% new coverage** in areas that were Total Not Spots in 2020 in total, around **3 million 100x100m pixels** (the equivalent of around 30,000 non-contiguous square kilometres) have gone from having no or partial coverage to full coverage across the 4 MNOs
- there are now many more locations where **consumers have more choice**. It also means there are many fewer rural locations with patchy or limited coverage than in 2020

The full version of the update report can be read [here](#).

Gareth also reminded that the [Local Government Association Annual Conference](#) is to take place on 22 to 24 October which is the largest event in the local government calendar. It brings together councillors, officers, and partners from across the UK to discuss the challenges and opportunities facing local government. This year's themes include sustainability, community engagement, and public service innovation. All relevant parties are welcome to book a place from the link above.

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