Digital Connectivity Working Group Update

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Since the last board meeting update, the ADEPT Digital Connectivity Working Group has met twice virtually in September and November. Not only colleagues from Local Authorities across the UK, but also from Local Government Association (LGA) are attending the 6 weekly meetings.

Meeting No. 1: Local Authority representatives from Leicestershire, Herefordshire, Cambridgeshire, Nottinghamshire, Shropshire, and Wolverhampton were present in September.

The Group received presentations from:
a) Prof Peter Kawalek, Director of the Centre for Information Management, Loughborough University about their findings on Digital Innovation in the Midlands Engine (DIME) which is a project identifying those digital innovations and technological developments that will enable the Midlands region to implement discontinuous change, make connections, encourage collaborations and identify gaps.
b) OFCOM about removal of the last public call box. BT has indicated that overall use of payphones has declined by over 90% in the last decade. However OFCOM band BT to remove phone boxes where there is no network coverage, in accident black spots, and a number of other locations which meet social need criteria. If there are two phone boxes within 400 metres' walk of each other, BT can take one away without following our rules. However, if they want to take away the last one as well, they have to follow an agreed process (i.e. displaying a notice for the public, informing relevant stakeholders like local authorities etc.)
c) Former MP Anna Turley and also the Chair of Protect and Connect who shared the details about their campaign to make changes to the current Electronic Communications Code 2017 that allows the operators make some savings on rents for land and property owners' to place mobile masts. Although protect and Connect would have liked to have local authority support for their campaign, the group members expressed their views in terms of both sides as communities requires digital connectivity and operators should be supported for their commercial delivery.

The meeting continued with a debate about district councils' role in superfast broadband delivery and data sharing aspects.

Meeting No. 2: The meeting in November were attended by 5 local authorities across the country: Herefordshire, Wolverhampton, Kent, Shropshire, and Nottinghamshire. And the main discussion was all about fastly approaching copper retirement.

John Livermore from Openreach explained all details about how to get ready for digital phone lines. From now until the end of 2025, service providers like SKY, TalkTalk and BT, will need to contact all of their customers and make them aware that they'll need to move their existing products and services that use the analogue phone network, from the wall socket, to the router. This is because once a service provider migrates their customers from the current setup, to a digital phone line, the wall socket will only provide access to the internet and not the more traditional voice calls that currently use a landline.

Guest speakers from DCMS Barrier Busting Task Force also informed the group about the bulk wayleave plans. Government's determination is to ensure the next generation of communications technologies are deployed at scale across the UK. The creation of a dedicated barrier busting unit in DCMS has been an important step forward in addressing the barriers to efficient, lower cost and quicker FTTP roll-out. For example, the overall cost burden and complexity of securing wayleaves

for different types of buildings (i.e. Council or privately owned, single property or part of an MDU or business park) is a considerable hurdle.

The ADEPT Digital Connectivity Working Group continues to get regular updates from Gareth Elliott, Mobile UK about the Shared Rural Network programme. At the last meeting, Gareth also talked about their recently published Connectivity and Climate Change report. Technologies such as the Internet of Things, telematics, and existing mobile technologies, will help underpin efforts to reach net-zero and mitigate climate change. This report sets out the potential emissions reductions that are possible with the enhanced connectivity provided by 5G technologies, existing mobile networks, and the Internet of Things.

The group is discussing to organise the next meeting as hybrid in LGA Offices, London. Depending on the government advice, necessary arrangements will be done.

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