

# Digital Connectivity Working Group Update

**Author: Ceren Clulow**

**Date: May 2024**

The ADEPT Digital Connectivity Working Group has met virtually on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2024 with representatives from 9 local authorities across the country including Staffordshire, Barnsley, Shropshire, Wolverhampton, Cambridgeshire, Nottinghamshire, Somerset, North Northamptonshire and Kent also colleagues attended from LGA, Building Digital UK (BDUK) and Mobile UK.

The meeting started with a questions and answers session with Andrew Field, UK Gigabit Programme Director for BDUK, which is BDUK which is an executive agency, sponsored by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT). The members shared some of their questions in advance of the meeting and the subjects were ranging from the gigabit voucher scheme process to better collaboration opportunities with the local authorities, from data transparency to fibre infrastructure delivery challenges etc. In his answers, it was clarified that Rural Gigabit Voucher Scheme delivery team will now be part of the overall delivery programme rather than managed separately which is expected to lead to a more joined up approach. Andrew also informed the members about the urban coverage model and the planned soft launch for the urban voucher scheme.

Gareth Elliott from Mobile UK presented an exclusive preview of their research on public awareness/perception showing that a large proportion have very little understanding of mobile infrastructure and how it works. The report is not published yet and the final results may change. The group also received update around Shared Rural Network and Virgin Media O2 has hit another significant milestone after rolling out reliable 4G coverage to 150 rural communities. Switching off 3G will make more space for faster, more reliable and more energy efficient 4G and 5G services. This switch-off has already started nationwide as some operators have already completed their switch-off, with others expected to follow suit shortly.

During Gareth's presentation, the discussion made it clear that there are lots of heat around PSTN switch off and the fact that there is not enough central coordination and direction which could lead to lack of proper support for vulnerable residents and unreasonable expectations on LAs to sort issues out such as identifying vulnerable people in communities etc. A lot of local authorities are becoming really concerned about this and facing a lot of complaints from communities who don't understand who is responsible. This area will be discussed widely at a future meeting.

Lastly, the group received presentation from Netomnia, a full fibre network operator, specifically around non-exclusive operator wayleave agreements and about the Electronic Communications Code in respect of fixed line broadband. Josh verity shared the common challenges and impacts for the property access agreements wayleaves for multi dwelling units and flats. The insight provided was really helpful to understand the benefits of having standardised wayleaves.

The plan for the next working group meeting in 6-8 weeks' time is to focus on the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) as all customers from the old analogue public switched telephone network will be moved to a fully digital network. The plan is to have moved everyone over before Openreach stop their service by 2027. By then, every phone line in the UK will be digital, routing calls over IP (Internet Protocol) rather than the traditional PSTN.

-ENDS-