Department for Science, Innovation & Technology

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To: Council Leaders
Cc: Council Chief Executives

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Dear Leader,

Supporting digital infrastructure deployment in your local area

Fast and reliable digital connectivity is increasingly important to our way of life. As people increasingly rely on their devices to work, learn and stay connected with each other, demand for greater speeds and more reliable connectivity is growing. Better digital connectivity is also key to delivering faster economic growth and increasing social inclusion.

The Government is committed to supporting the delivery of next-generation connectivity to communities across the UK by driving towards nationwide gigabit broadband and 5G coverage by 2030.

We need your help to achieve these goals. Broadband and mobile rollout rely heavily on local authorities prioritising digital infrastructure and placing it at the heart of their wider Place strategy. I am writing to you today to highlight a number of areas that remain a challenge, and how they can be approached to boost telecoms investment in your area.

Engaging Telecoms Operators in Wayleave Negotiations

Detailed and early engagement with telecoms operators is key when approached for wayleave agreements - commercial agreements allowing an operator to install their network on a landowner's property. Engaging in a timely manner not only helps you understand operators' deployment plans - but also allows you to provide important feedback and local context that can help shape rollout in your local community, leading to faster and more efficient deployment.

I would also encourage you to use non-exclusive wayleaves. These agreements enable multiple operators who agree to meet the terms set out to deploy their networks more efficiently. This means that access to local authority land and buildings is not restricted to just one or two operators, making investment in your area more attractive and allowing you to offer greater choice to residents.

Flexibility with Street Works

While I understand how frustrating repeated street works can be, they are vital for improving both fixed-line and mobile connectivity. Full-fibre networks are the foundation for residential broadband – and are also essential for mobile coverage, providing the necessary backhaul for mobile masts.

I urge you to approach street works with an open, flexible mindset, working closely with operators to accommodate work where necessary, and promoting the swift rollout of both fibre

and wireless networks Practical ways to do that while minimising disruption can be found in the Street Works Toolkit on the gov.uk website.

I would also like to highlight the flexi-permit trials due to start early next year. These trials will test a new process allowing telecoms companies to carry out similar works across multiple streets within a pre-defined area and time-period (such as a month), rather than having to apply for individual permits on a street-by-street basis in advance. To support effective administration of such a system, highway authorities would receive a detailed forward plan of works, helping them better coordinate their road network. I would encourage you to help shape this policy by taking part in the trials when they commence.

Early Engagement on Planning

Active participation from local planning authorities can speed up telecoms deployment. I urge you to have early and strategic conversations with fixed and mobile operators. Pre-application consultations and Planning Performance Agreements can play a valuable role here - creating the space to establish ways of working, increase technical understanding and give site-specific feedback before planning applications are submitted in large volumes. This is especially key to moving wireless infrastructure more quickly through the planning system, ensuring timely and efficient deployment and helping to improve local mobile coverage and capacity.

Proactivity is also important for fibre exchanges. The advent of full-fibre networks has led to innovative approaches to connecting networks – of which fibre exchanges are an example. Although modest in size (around the size of a shipping container), each fibre exchange provides connectivity to tens of thousands of premises. In most cases, fibre installation cannot start until planning permission has been granted for a viable site. Without these exchanges, network deployment would stall, hindering Government objectives and delaying the rollout of Project Gigabit.

Whilst we recognise the need to fully scrutinise planning applications, I ask for you to support the deployment of this infrastructure wherever possible.

My officials will continue to work with the telecoms industry to ensure planning applications use simple language and are of a sufficient standard. They will also ensure that fixed line operators share more general knowledge on their fibre exchanges, particularly in areas where Project Gigabit rollout is due to occur.

I would encourage you to proactively identify suitable sites for new digital infrastructure deployment in your local plans, and to be upfront with operators about the documents you require before considering planning applications.

Making Assets and Street Furniture Available

To support the deployment of small cell technology, I ask that you make council-owned assets and street furniture available for this purpose, on a non-exclusive basis.

Small cells are crucial for enhancing wireless coverage and capacity, and their deployment will significantly benefit urban and rural areas alike.

Appointing Digital Champions

Digital Champions can help drive improved digital connectivity within your region. Ideally, this role should be filled by a senior executive in your council who can evaluate how improved

connectivity and increased digital inclusion can positively impact lives and support the council's broader objectives.

Digital Champions can play a key part in developing a local Digital Strategy that outlines these objectives. They can also work with operators to support network deployment, attracting investment and delivering the advantages of enhanced connectivity to your communities.

Support from the Chief Executive and Councillors

I would also ask for support from your Chief Executive and councillors in championing infrastructure deployment initiatives. Your leadership and advocacy are vital in achieving digital inclusion and ensuring that all members of your communities can benefit from improved digital connectivity.

Further guidance on how local authorities can support the rollout of fixed and wireless networks is available on the Digital Connectivity Portal.

If you have any questions on these measures, please email bbtf@dsit.gov.uk. I trust I can count on your support.

