

# Building Mobile Britain:

The Case for Local Authority  
Digital Champions



Mobile<sup>UK</sup>



**BUILDING  
MOBILE  
BRITAIN**

## About Mobile UK

Mobile UK is the trade association of the UK's mobile network operators (MNO)s - EE, Virgin Media O2, Three and Vodafone. Mobile UK's mission is to realise the power of mobile to improve the lives of our customers and the prosperity of the UK.

For further information on the work of Mobile UK visit:  
<http://www.mobileuk.org/>



## About Building Mobile Britain

Mobile UK launched Building Mobile Britain to support the mobile industry's collaboration with national and local government, regulators, industry, consumers and citizens to overcome the challenges to expanding mobile networks.

For further information about Building Mobile Britain visit:  
<http://www.buildingmobilebritain.org.uk>



## About #5GCheckTheFacts

The #5GCheckTheFacts campaign provides factually accurate information about 5G and offers answers to common queries to help improve understanding.

For further information about #5GCheckTheFacts visit:  
<https://www.mobileuk.org/5g-and-health>



## About #MeetTheChampions

The #MeetTheChampions video series showcases local councils which have created the role of a Digital Champion to promote digital connectivity, and to coordinate digital strategies across the council and with the industry to help smooth the roll-out of mobile infrastructure.

If you would like to get involved with the #MeetTheChampions campaign, then contact us at [meetthechampions@mobileuk.org](mailto:meetthechampions@mobileuk.org)



## About This Report

The report was produced by Mobile UK with assistance from Purplefish and Block B.

Purplefish is an award winning Bristol PR and communications agency: [www.purplefish.agency](http://www.purplefish.agency)

Graphic designer Paul Hocking: [www.block-b.com](http://www.block-b.com).

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# Foreword

*We live in a digital world, with banking, democratic functions, job applications, benefits and other public services increasingly being moved online, and the last two years have seen a huge acceleration in the adoption of digital tools both by local authorities and the wider public.*

There are many benefits of digital transformation including the flexibility it gives us to interact with residents and colleagues. We have seen the way in which hybrid and virtual meetings have enabled us to meet with fellow councillors and the public from across the country, without time consuming and environmentally impactful travel, allowing for critical decision making to be made democratically and without delay during times of emergency.

We have also seen the way in which digital skills, equipment and reliable digital connectivity are now crucial to enable people to fully participate in society and engage in 21st century education and employment systems.

The above will only be possible however with the huge investment needed in our digital infrastructure, both fibre and mobile. The Government's Levelling Up White Paper<sup>1</sup> highlights the importance of connectivity and sets out as one of its missions that by 2030, the UK will have nationwide gigabit-capable broadband and 4G coverage with 5G coverage for the majority of the population. In a similar vein to the original broadband roll-out 15 years ago, councils have a key role to play in making this happen.

Both at an officer and a member level, we need councils to be ready and active in ensuring that investment happens and translates into real world improvements in signal quality and data capacity for communities and businesses. The recent *Connecting the UK*<sup>2</sup> report highlighted that, where Digital Champions were in place, they were four times more likely to have an effective relationship with digital infrastructure providers – and four times more likely to say they were doing enough to smooth the way for rollout.

Our local knowledge and expertise can help digital infrastructure providers in delivering the investment needed. We can help coordinate local delivery and respond to surges in local rollout activity. We can overcome community challenges and ensure

that digital is considered from the start for new developments. Our local advocacy can help increase understanding around new installations and help galvanise demand to make investment more attractive.

But for me, the role of a Digital Champion is so much more than just delivery. It is about selling the benefits and opportunities that digital investment will deliver to our residents and for our councils. Like the benefits of smart data and 5G, supporting transformational changes to public services from buses, tourism, and even social care. Or Full Fibre and remote working, helping with recruitment and retention in an ever-competitive jobs market.

I believe Digital Champions are necessary for local authorities up and down the country. We in local government are the key to helping deliver the digital infrastructure our communities need, but also in landing the public sector benefits it will bring. That is why you should have one, and why government should support them with funding.



Foreword by  
Cllr Mark Hawthorne MBE

Digital Champion - Local Government Association and Leader of Gloucestershire County Council



# Introduction

*Today mobile communications are vital to how society communicates and conducts business.*

The UK Government recognises this central role and has set a target for the majority of households to be connected to 5G by 2030. Further to that, 95% of the UK's landmass is set to be covered by a reliable 4G signal through the Shared Rural Network, a joint initiative between the UK's MNOs and HM Government.<sup>1</sup> In order to achieve this, it is equally important to identify and alleviate any barriers that impede or make mobile deployment more difficult, costly or timely to rollout.

In this report we highlight several areas that continue to make mobile equipment deployment difficult; these are the lack of coordination, expertise, and focussed resource to enable mobile connectivity at local authority level. It should be noted that local authorities face unprecedented revenue constraints with central government grants (including retained business rates) cut 37% in real-terms between 2009/10 and 2019/20, from £41bn to £26bn in 2019/20 prices.<sup>3</sup> Even with this backdrop, investment in a localised resource in the form of a Digital Champion offers significant benefits in enabling mobile deployment and thus realising the benefits of connectivity to local areas more quickly.

**Mobile connectivity protected a fifth of the UK's economic output during the pandemic, representing £205bn of business.<sup>4</sup>**

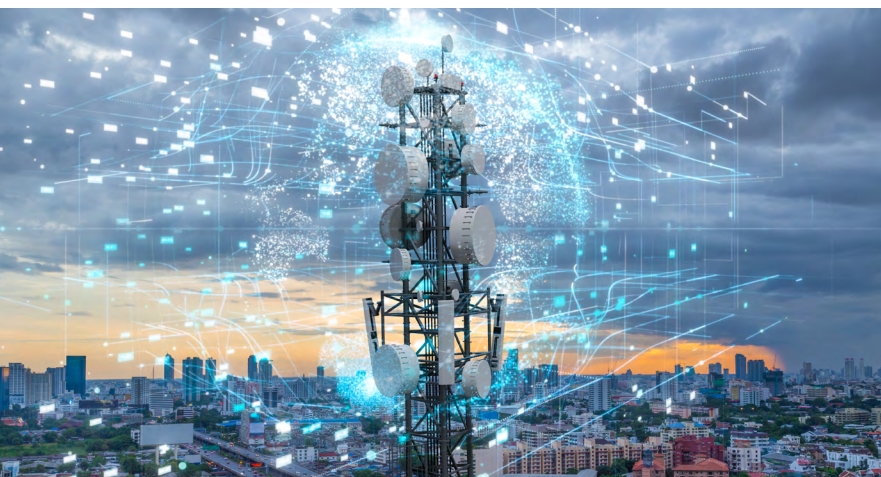
The benefits of improving mobile connectivity go far beyond greater mobile coverage. Increased mobile deployment has huge potential to deliver real economic, political, and societal benefits.

**These benefits include:**

- **Driving local economic growth and supporting small businesses**
- **Tackling digital exclusion**
- **Facilitating innovation in health and social care services**
- **Fostering efficiency in energy and transport**

This report seeks to highlight how Digital Champions, funded by central government, put in place to coordinate local authorities' digital strategies and relationships with the industry, can have hugely positive outcomes in the smooth deployment of mobile networks and in building more effective relationships both within councils and with telecommunications providers.

**Councils with a Digital Champion are 4x more likely to smooth the rollout of mobile infrastructure.**



# The Case for Connectivity: The Challenge

The economic benefits of mobile connectivity are clear, with 63% of councillors nationally in agreement that rollout of broadband and 5G is vital to levelling up the UK. 77% support broadband and mobile infrastructure being rolled out in their local areas. However, the strategies, people and skills needed to enable mobile deployment are often simply unavailable at a local authority level.

In a nationwide survey, less than half of councillors stated that their local authority had a digital strategy in place. Less than a third (31%) said that they had an assigned role or Digital Champion. These roles are key to help coordinate with the industry, promote understanding and awareness about mobile connectivity within the local authority, and to assist in smoothing the rollout of mobile equipment.<sup>5</sup>

Further, the survey found that less than a third of councillors believed that their local authority was doing enough to smooth the rollout of telecommunications infrastructure and, more worryingly, less than half agreed that improving digital connectivity was a priority.<sup>6</sup>

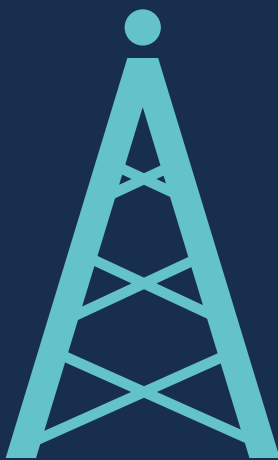
Fewer than  $\frac{1}{2}$

(45%) of councillors say their local authority has a digital infrastructure strategy in place.



Fewer than  $\frac{1}{3}$

(32%) of councillors believe their local authority is doing enough to smooth the way for rollout of telecommunications infrastructure and equipment in their local area.



(Figures quoted here are taken from Cluttons/ YouGov Report *Connecting the UK: Getting the nation gigabit ready report*, January 2022).<sup>3</sup>

Delays to the rollout of 5G could cost the country tens of billions of pounds in lost economic output.

To the tune of **£41 billion.**<sup>7</sup>

# Fewer than $\frac{1}{3}$



(31%) of councillors say that their local authority has assigned a Digital Champion role.

If 5G coverage reaches a quarter more of the population than the Government's current target of 51%, it will produce GDP gains of

**£41.7 billion by 2027.<sup>8</sup>**

The absence of priority and actions to assist rollout is compounded by the lack of funding and resources available. Few councillors stated that they believed their local authority has the information or funding available to raise awareness and understanding of faster, more reliable connectivity in their local community.

Limited awareness and understanding about mobile connectivity and the need for mobile infrastructure can result in a belief that it can simply be deployed elsewhere or that existing infrastructure is adequate. It is often not understood that mobile equipment installations add capacity to existing networks, a point that is particularly relevant with the current installation of high capacity 5G networks. For example, one operator may not be operational in an area or has weaker coverage, and an installation will seek to boost or offer new coverage in addition to existing operators.

In more extreme cases, lack of understanding can also lead to the growth of misinformation or conspiracy theories, which, during the pandemic, even led to arson attacks on mobile infrastructure and attacks on telecoms personnel.



Few councillors believe their local authority has the information or funding it needs to raise awareness and understanding of faster, more reliable connectivity in the local community and

**less than half (43%)**

agree improving digital connectivity a priority.

(Figures quoted here are taken from Cluttons/ YouGov Report *Connecting the UK: Getting the nation gigabit ready report*, January 2022).<sup>8</sup>



# The Case for Digital Champions: Fast Tracking Connectivity

Local authorities are hugely important to mobile infrastructure deployment and sit in a significant position to accelerate mobile and gigabit rollout. Their role lies in setting local strategy and policy around digital connectivity, raising awareness, championing connectivity, and coordinating both internally and externally with the council itself and telecommunications providers.

While the national picture suggests this needs to be improved, research also suggests that local authorities which have prioritised digital connectivity and appointed Digital Champions have had significant success in speeding up rollout and improving relationships with telecommunications companies.

*“A faster 5G rollout will help drive a stronger UK recovery whilst providing an essential tool to ‘level up’ the regions.”<sup>9</sup>*

Indeed, polls suggest that where a local authority has a digital strategy in place they are:

**3x** more likely to agree **promoting and improving digital connectivity** is a priority for the local area

**4x** more likely to say their local authority’s relationship with the **telecommunication and digital infrastructure providers rolling out infrastructure and equipment is effective.**

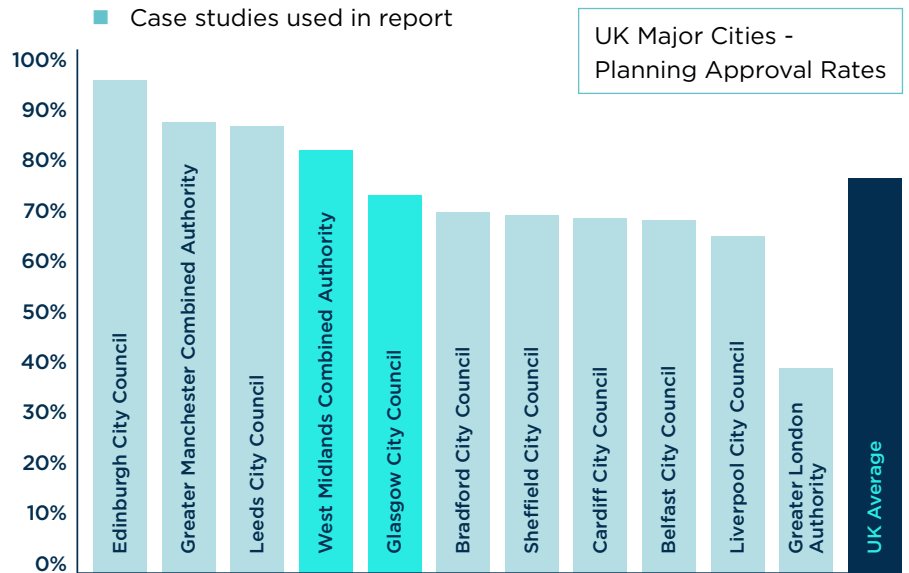
**4x** more likely to say their local authority is doing enough to smooth the way for the **rollout of telecommunications infrastructure and equipment in the local area.**



(Figures quoted here are taken from Cluttons/ YouGov Report *Connecting the UK: Getting the nation gigabit ready report*, January 2022).<sup>3</sup>



Mobile UK's own research has found that planning approval rates also tend to be higher where councils have put in place Digital Champions or schemes to promote mobile connectivity. Higher planning approval rates mean faster deployment of mobile infrastructure and therefore improved coverage, capacity and strength of mobile signals. It also reduces the likelihood of planning appeals, or decisions overturned by the national planning inspectorate, which itself reduces costs for both local authorities and mobile companies while also minimising the time it takes to improve mobile connectivity.



As outlined earlier in this report local authorities are under significant financial pressures, and it is understood that they will struggle to prioritise programmes to remove barriers to digital infrastructure rollout in the face of current funding streams and continuing efforts to build recovery from the pandemic. This presents a significant barrier to the UK Government's wider ambitions towards recovery.

*According to independent analysts, we have over 50% population coverage. In other words, 50% of people in the Midlands have access to a 5G signal from one or multiple operators.*

**Robert Franks,**  
CEO of West Midlands 5G

(Source: Mobile UK #Talking5G series)

**This report recommends that the UK Government must recognise this funding shortfall and put in place measures to invest in Digital Champions at a local level to help coordinate and prioritise digital connectivity.**

**In addition, further efforts must be made to raise awareness of the critical benefits of digital connectivity and to encourage greater leadership at a local level to help promote mobile connectivity and infrastructure rollout.**



# Digital Champions in Action: Case Studies

There is a collective of 'digital first' local authorities already committed to investing in improving digital connectivity as part of strategies to increase connectivity and create positive and tangible local impact.

Here we highlight four campaigns leading the way, demonstrating the importance of digital deployment taking a local-first approach.

## CASE STUDY 1

### Essex County Council

(Superfast Essex and #Be5GSmart)

<https://www.essex.gov.uk/everyones-essex-our-plan-for-essex-2021-2025>



Recognising that digital connectivity is a key foundation to the future of Essex, the County Council set up Superfast Essex initially to improve broadband provision across the County. With a focus on delivering superfast broadband to as many homes and businesses as possible, the programme was set up to work with two network operators, Openreach and Gigaclear.

Moving beyond broadband and working to drive demand to boost the wider adoption of digital technologies, Superfast Essex is developing the #Be5GSmart campaign to raise awareness and bust myths about 5G technologies and to help support commercial mobile operators' rollout.



### Impact

Essex County Council's award-winning broadband improvement programme, Superfast Essex, has already secured enhanced connectivity to over 146,000 homes and businesses. That's one in six addresses across the county. The programme has boosted the adoption of new faster connections by raising awareness of the opportunities offered by digital technology.

The Superfast Essex team includes seven people whose role is dedicated to working with operators to break down barriers and to smooth the rollout of mobile and fixed-line technologies across the county. The team is also backed politically with a cabinet member who holds direct responsibility for the programme.



## CASE STUDY 2

### West Midlands 5G

<https://www.wm5g.org.uk/>



West Midlands 5G (WM5G) is the UK's leading 5G testbed. Its digital strategy was set up to accelerate the rollout of 5G networks and to test and prove the benefits of 5G across key sectors in the region. At the outset WM5G recognised the need for more coordination, support and guidance for the creation of a Digital Infrastructure Strategy.

WM5G has supported and worked with the West Midlands Combined Authority and all seven local authorities - which were all committed to supporting the rollout of digital infrastructure to future proof and enhance the reputation of the region as a place to live, run a business and invest.



### Impact

The West Midlands was ranked highest in a 5G mobile coverage study by independent telecoms advisory company Umlaut in 2020 and 2021.

WM5G has recorded meaningful successes through this approach, with infrastructure delivery between 6-12 months ahead of schedule in Birmingham, Dudley and Wolverhampton. This has played a crucial part in the West Midlands being recognised as the most connected region in the UK.

West Midlands Local Authorities challenged innovators to lead the 5G 'Smart Cities' revolution. The collaboration laid down a challenge for innovative start-ups and small businesses to shape the future of UK Smart Cities, through the exploration of 5G applications in the West Midlands via WM5G's 5G accelerator programmes.



## CASE STUDY 3

### Glasgow City Council

<https://glasgow.gov.uk/digital>



The Glasgow Digital Strategy, developed in October 2018, communicated the strategic aims of the city. Glasgow City Council (GCC) wanted to reap the inclusive economic benefits of robust connectivity by attracting and growing digital infrastructure investment and therefore accelerating rollout of connectivity, including full fibre and 5G.

In support of this, GCC established its Telecoms Unit in 2020 to increase the efficiency of engagement between the Council departments (e.g. Planning, Roads) and the connectivity service providers and operators. The Telecoms



unit is supported by standard processes, templates and documentation as well as a transparent rate card. In addition, there is on-line access to GCC assets. The Telecoms Unit increases efficiency of engagement with the digital infrastructure industry by acting as a single interface to the Council to co-ordinate and manage activity in the city. Glasgow is the first local authority in the UK to establish such a unit.

#### Impact

Glasgow has established both excellent strategic relationships across the digital infrastructure industry, encouraging investment in Glasgow, as well as efficient operational relationships underpinned by the Telecoms Unit. The benefits continue, growing investment in Glasgow's connectivity. For example, Glasgow is the first UK City to have signed a number of small cell agreements which will enable the deployment of small cells on GCC assets across the city, improving 4G capacity and 5G deployment. Looking ahead, GCC seeks to support mobile network operators deploying infrastructure and enabling better connectivity in the city.

## CASE STUDY 4

CITY OF  
WOLVERHAMPTON  
COUNCIL

### Wolverhampton City Council

<https://www.wolverhampton.gov.uk/>

The first national lockdown in 2020 highlighted the scale of digital exclusion in Wolverhampton, specifically, the lack of devices and data poverty. To address this and support the rollout of full fibre broadband and 5G across the city, Wolverhampton City Council adopted a digital infrastructure strategy.

As part of this strategy, the council appointed a Director of Strategy (Digital Champion), a co-ordinator, and a councillor digital innovation champion. This team works with external and internal partners to support the rollout of digital across the city.



#### Impact

Since the launch of its digital strategy, Wolverhampton City Council has made significant progress with the installation of full fibre broadband. With 170 public sector premises now connected to full fibre, and the commercial rollout underway with 20,000 households already live, most of the city's residents have access to gigabit coverage.

All four mobile network operators are rolling out 5G in the city with the Council's proactive approach estimated to have accelerated this by at least six months.

The longer-term goals of this digital strategy are to build on the programme's success through futureproofing digital infrastructure across the city and to make Wolverhampton a Gigabit and Smart city, that all residents benefit from.

# What is a Digital Champion?

Having explored commonalities between established Digital Champions we have set out five minimum requirements we see as key to embedding an effective digital strategy.

This report has highlighted the clear and significant benefits to mobile and digital infrastructure rollout where Digital Champions have been implemented. Therefore, to ensure that digital connectivity is prioritised at a local level, and to ensure local authorities have the resources, information, and funding to appoint Digital Champions, we call on the Government to set out a fully funded settlement to enable local councils to implement schemes for Digital Champions.

We understand that Digital Champions can represent a catch-all term and as such we have highlighted below the minimum requirements we believe underpin such a role:

## Five minimum requirements of a Digital Champion

### 1 A Fully Funded Role

The role of the Digital Champion must be a fully funded role with the resources and skills to deliver a comprehensive programme which enables the rollout of digital connectivity across the local area.

Mobile UK calls on the UK Government to provide funding and investment to ensure that Digital Champions are a key element in achieving the mission within the Levelling Up White Paper to extend 4G and 5G coverage to the majority of the population.

### 2 Senior-Level Role and Responsibility

A Digital Champion must be a senior-level role which can coordinate across multiple departments and have decision-making powers that will be crucial to generating outcomes.

### 3 Political Responsibility and Leadership

The Digital Champion should be supported politically by a senior (preferably Cabinet-Level or equivalent) councillor responsible for digital strategy, policy, and the Digital Champion role.

Best practice suggests that where the political lead has the digital (or equivalent) role within their title, they are more likely to achieve positive outcomes and act as a champion for digital connectivity and wider industry coordination.

### 4 Experience and Skills

A Digital Champion is a complex role requiring skills across several disciplines. Additionally, the position must be able to engage, and work, with the telecoms industry. It is important for the role's success that any appointed member has a high level of skill and understanding of the sector and pertinent issues.

### 5 Outcome, not Output Focused

A proactive approach to working with fixed and mobile network operators to simplify processes and agreements is needed. A Digital Champion's duties should include addressing barriers to the rollout; mapping and making assets available to operators to support the rollout; identifying opportunities for public use of digital connectivity; and changing the culture of the organisation to recognise the importance of digital connection to the local area.





# FAQs: Mobile Connectivity

## 1 How do I get access to 5G?

Firstly, you need a 5G signal in your area (just as you need a 4G signal to get 4G now). Secondly, you need a device that can receive a 5G signal - many 5G-enabled smartphones are now available, with more coming onto the market.

## 2 Does 5G pose a danger to your health?

5G uses radio waves - as does 4G and 3G - which have been found safe in numerous studies when used within guidelines. Public health organisations around the world support this conclusion.

## 3 Does 5G mean more masts and antennae?

Some new infrastructure will be needed, but existing masts will be adapted for 5G wherever possible. If new sites are needed, relevant planning rules will apply to them being built. For further information, check #5GCheckTheFacts [www.mobileuk.org/5g-and-health](http://www.mobileuk.org/5g-and-health)

## 4 Is 5G bad for wildlife?

No. Despite many false claims, wildlife has not been found to be negatively affected by 5G.

## 5 Will 5G offer an alternative to broadband?

4G and 5G can both provide mobile home broadband connections. However, while 5G will offer potentially near gigabit capable speeds in the future, currently UK 5G mobile networks don't provide the same capacity or offer speeds as fast as 'full fibre' for home broadband.









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