Planning for the Future White Paper, 2020
Informal comments on the proposals

October 2020

techUK is the UK trade body for the digital technology sector and we represent UK data centre operators, characterised collectively as Data Infrastructure. There is generally very patchy awareness of the infrastructural importance of data centres among policy makers. This means the sector is rarely considered in strategic policy planning. For instance, data centres were absent from the Industrial Strategy and the Digital Strategy, despite comprising a sector that perfectly symbolises where those two strategies intersect, and is critical to their successful delivery.

While we are not responding in detail, we have included a few informal observations below, followed by a short introduction to data centres. We are currently working with planning professionals to develop an FAQ for planners and an early draft of this document is attached to our consultation response.   We would of course be delighted to facilitate dialogue and further engagement.

Observations on the consultation

- We accept that digital infrastructure is not the focus of this white paper and that data centres are therefore not mentioned explicitly. However, many of the proposals therein depend upon the existence of world class digital infrastructure. This in turn depends on adequate, modern data centre capacity being developed alongside existing communications infrastructure.   Data centres and telecommunications networks interact to provide our digital infrastructure: neither can work without the other.

- The questions regarding the infrastructure levy seem to suggest that an infrastructure levy is, and will increasingly continue to be, applied to infrastructure developments in order to subsidise housing. Should this not be an affordable housing levy, if that is its purpose?   We appreciate the urgent need for affordable housing and think the terminology should reflect the destination of levy spending. We think that infrastructure should also remain a priority. Admittedly we may have misunderstood this and if so would welcome clarification.

- While this white paper may not be the right place for explicit references to data infrastructure, the National Planning Policy Framework is that place. However, data centres are not mentioned in the current iteration of the NPPF, although communications infrastructure does feature. As a result, planning professionals are frequently bemused by data centre development applications, which, moreover, are inconsistently classified. We would welcome acknowledgement of the infrastructural importance of data infrastructure in future iterations of the NPPF.

Introducing data centres

Each new data centre contributes between £397 M and £436 M GVA per year to the UK economy[1] while the contribution of each existing data centre is estimated to lie between £291 M and £320 M per annum. Collectively, the UK's data centre sector quietly underpins an internet economy that contributes over 16% of domestic output, 10% of employment and 24% of total UK exports[i]. This success is attributable to state-of-the-art digital infrastructure that is secure, efficient, reliable and competitive. It also depends, now and in the future, on adequate capacity, both in terms of data infrastructure (data centres) and connectivity (telecommunications networks). From a policy perspective, the successful delivery of a multitude of initiatives, from the Digital Strategy to the Levelling Up agenda, are heavily reliant on world-class data infrastructure.   You can find out more about the UK's data centre market from our Sector Overview[2].

What do data centres do?

Data centres receive, process, manage, store and transmit digital data. Every time we read a post on Facebook, order our shopping from Sainsbury's, get directions for a journey, download a film, send an email or check the weather forecast, a data centre is involved. In fact, a single transaction usually depends on many data centres interacting – not just one. Behind that, of course, it is data centres that enable supermarkets to resupply, retailers and banks to process financial payments, delivery companies to manage logistics and government to deliver services. Data centres are the physical manifestation of our digital economy.

If you need more information on data infrastructure or any clarification regarding the points above, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

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techUK is the UK's leading technology membership organisation, with more than 850 members spread across the UK. We are a network that enables our members to learn from each other and grow in a way which contributes to the country both socially and economically.   www.techuk.org

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[1] See: https://www.digitalrealty.com/data-economy
[2] The Most Important Sector You've Never Heard of: Data Centre Sector Overview 2020: https://www.techuk.org/insights/reports/item/18557-uk-data-centre-sector-overview-2020