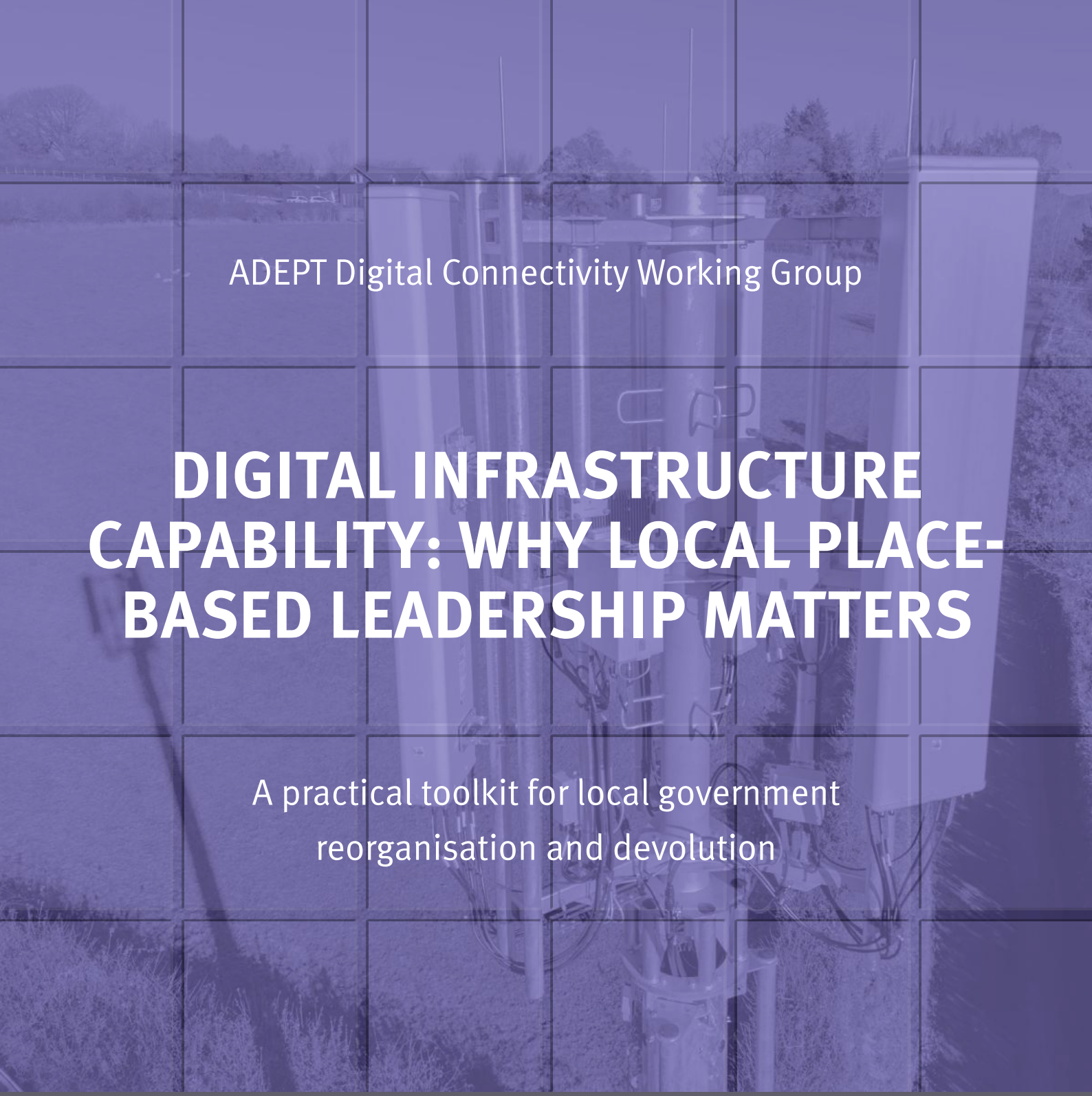


ADEPT Digital Connectivity Working Group

DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE CAPABILITY: WHY LOCAL PLACE-BASED LEADERSHIP MATTERS

A practical toolkit for local government reorganisation and devolution

ADEPT

The Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport

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AT A GLANCE

Digital infrastructure is the hidden foundation of growth, reform and resilient places.
This page summarises the central argument before the detailed evidence that follows.

Headline messages

- **Connectivity is now essential infrastructure.** It underpins growth, productivity, services and inclusion.
- **National progress is not the same as local completion.** Coverage gaps are increasingly granular and complex.
- **The final stretch is the hardest.** Rural, coastal, business, multi-dwelling and marginal areas need local action.
- **Local digital infrastructure teams turn policy into delivery.** They unblock wayleaves, assets, planning, data and operator engagement.
- **The function is about place, not corporate ICT.** It belongs with growth, planning, transport and regeneration.
- **Losing capability creates lasting risk.** Data, relationships and practical delivery expertise are difficult to rebuild.

Key statistics

- **99% by 2032**: Government expectation for premises to access gigabit-capable broadband.
- **Standalone 5G by 2030**: Government ambition for standalone 5G coverage to reach all populated areas of the UK.
- **The delivery gap**: National progress is strong, but it is not the same as local completion. Many areas are still some distance from the 99% by 2032 ambition, and the premises left to connect are often the most complex and costly to reach.
- **78% full fibre nationally**: Ofcom reports full fibre availability to 78% of UK residential premises and SMEs in 2025. The headline 87% gigabit-capable figure is encouraging, but it masks wide local variation, with many counties and communities not yet close to that level of coverage.
- **£21.1bn-£30.8bn**: estimated annual Gross Value Added potential from full digital inclusion.

Why digital infrastructure teams matter

National ambition ⇢ local intelligence ⇢ barrier removal ⇢ operator confidence ⇢ faster deployment ⇢ growth, inclusion and resilient services

Without the local team, the chain breaks: gaps are missed, barriers persist and investment is harder to land.

Digital infrastructure teams are the local delivery engine for national connectivity ambitions. They provide the evidence, relationships and practical problem-solving capacity needed to unlock investment, reach hard-to-serve places and ensure that growth, public service reform and digital inclusion are not constrained by weak or poorly planned connectivity.

Lessons from local government reorganisations to date:

- **Digital infrastructure capability should be designed into the future operating model**, not left as an inherited or optional function.
- **The function is best placed within place, growth, transport, regeneration or strategic planning**, rather than being absorbed as a narrow corporate ICT role.
- **Strategic authority scale matters**: it preserves specialist expertise, provides a single operator interface and aligns connectivity with economic geographies.
- **Transition plans should protect data, supplier relationships, live programme intelligence, public asset knowledge and escalation routes** before reorganisation takes effect.

Practical checklist:

Appendix 1 provides a checklist to help local authorities and strategic authorities ensure digital infrastructure capability, data, relationships and delivery functions are protected through reorganisation and devolution.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Digital infrastructure is no longer a technical nice-to-have. It is the hidden foundation of growth, productivity, investment, public service reform and resilient places.

Broadband, mobile and advanced wireless networks now sit alongside transport, energy, water and housing as essential economic infrastructure. Places that can deliver reliable, high-capacity connectivity will be better placed to attract investment, support innovation, modernise services and reduce inequality. Places that cannot will fall behind.

The UK has made strong progress on gigabit-capable broadband, full fibre and mobile coverage, but national headline figures can mask the places where residents, businesses and public services still experience poor connectivity. The remaining gaps are often highly localised, commercially difficult and operationally complex: rural communities, coastal areas, settlement edges, business parks, multi-dwelling buildings, transport corridors and premises affected by wayleave, planning or asset-access barriers.

The experience to date points to a clear set of lessons for future delivery:

- **The final stretch of delivery is the hardest.** Market rollout and national programmes will not, by themselves, resolve every gap in fixed and mobile connectivity.
- **Local intelligence is essential.** Coverage maps, supplier plans and national datasets need to be tested against local knowledge, lived experience, business demand and site-level delivery barriers.
- **Digital infrastructure teams turn ambition into delivery.** They convene operators, unblock wayleaves, coordinate public assets, support planning and highways, strengthen data analysis, escalate programme risks and keep hard-to-serve places visible.
- **The function is about place, not corporate ICT.** It belongs alongside growth, regeneration, planning, transport and place-making, where it can influence investment, development, public assets and service transformation.
- **Scale matters.** The experience of local government reorganisations undertaken to date indicates that strategic authorities are best placed to provide a single interface for operators, maintain specialist capability, align connectivity with spatial and growth plans, and coordinate assets across the geography that telecoms markets actually serve. Telecoms operators have also emphasised that their engagement capacity is limited and that they are better able to work through combined, mayoral or strategic authorities that provide a single, coherent interface. Fragmenting the strategic function across multiple smaller authorities risks making places harder to engage with and potentially less attractive for future investment.
- **Collaboration is the operating model.** A strategic digital infrastructure team cannot deliver this agenda alone. It must work through formal arrangements with planning, highways and street works, housing, estates, regeneration, transport and economic development functions located within the new unitary authorities.
- **Losing the function creates long-term risk.** Once local data, relationships, supplier history and practical problem-solving expertise are lost, they are difficult and slow to rebuild.

Local government review creates an important opportunity to strengthen digital infrastructure capability as a strategic enabler of growth, reform and place-making. The function should be designed into future operating models at the right, strategic scale, with sufficient expertise and formal links to the planning, highways, housing, estates, and economic development functions located within the new unitary authorities. The strategic team should provide specialist leadership, evidence, market engagement and cross-boundary coordination.

Delivery will depend on the statutory powers, assets, processes and local knowledge held across the constituent authorities. Protecting both the specialist capability and the collaborative operating arrangements will help secure faster deployment, stronger market engagement, better use of public assets and more consistent support for communities and businesses.

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PURPOSE OF THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit is intended to support local authorities, strategic authorities and partners as they consider the future design of digital infrastructure capability through local government review and wider devolution.

It sets out why digital infrastructure should be treated as core economic and place-based infrastructure, why dedicated local teams are essential to delivery, and what needs to be protected, strengthened and designed into future operating models.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations draw on the experience of local government reorganisations completed to date. That experience points consistently towards retaining specialist digital infrastructure capability at strategic scale, or through a shared or hosted arrangement across successor local authorities, rather than unnecessarily splitting it between smaller authorities.

On that basis, future operating models should reflect the following design principles:

- **Treat digital infrastructure as strategic economic infrastructure** by embedding it in local growth plans, spatial development strategies, regeneration frameworks, transport planning and public service transformation from the outset.
- **Position digital infrastructure teams within place-based directorates** so they can work directly with planning, highways, estates, regeneration, economic development and public service reform.
- **Hold the function at strategic authority scale**, reflecting the experience of reorganisations to date, where specialist capability has generally been retained county-wide or through shared or hosted arrangements rather than disaggregated across successor local authorities. This helps maintain critical mass, provide a coherent operator interface and align investment with wider economic geographies.
- **Establish a formal collaborative operating model** linking the strategic team to named leads for planning, highways, housing, estates and economic development in every unitary authority, supported by shared guidance, regular officer coordination and clear escalation routes.
- **Protect specialist capability through local government review** by retaining staff expertise, Geographic Information System (GIS) and data capability, supplier relationships, public asset knowledge, live programme intelligence and escalation routes.
- **Use local teams to unlock the final stretch of delivery** by targeting microgaps, business connectivity constraints, rural and coastal challenges, mobile not-spots, public asset opportunities and hard-to-resolve wayleave or planning barriers.
- **Make digital infrastructure visible in investment and service decisions** so that housing growth, business parks, town centres, health and care models, education, smart places, AI adoption and emergency resilience are enabled by strong connectivity rather than constrained by weak provision.

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Part 1 - WHY DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE MATTERS

"Digital infrastructure is foundational to growth, productivity, competitiveness and public service reform, but national progress should not be confused with completion."

KEY MESSAGES

- **Digital infrastructure is critical national infrastructure.** It now sits alongside transport, energy, water and housing as a foundation for growth and reform.
- **National progress can mask local gaps.** Headline coverage figures do not always reflect lived experience, capacity, indoor signal or site-level barriers.
- **The remaining challenge is harder.** The premises, business sites and communities left behind are often dispersed, costly and operationally complex to reach.
- **Weak connectivity has real consequences.** It can undermine investment, productivity, public service reform, inclusion and access to services.

Introduction

Access to high quality digital infrastructure is essential, if places are to thrive. Digital transformation programmes, economic growth and innovation depend on it.

The Government's *UK Infrastructure: A 10 Year Strategy* (June *2025*)[1] explicitly places digital alongside transport, energy, water and housing as part of the critical national infrastructure needed to drive growth, productivity and living standards. In parallel, the **UK's Modern Industrial Strategy** (published June 2025)[2] sets out a 10-year plan to increase business investment and grow the industries of the future, with the **Digital and Technologies Sector Plan[2] positioning connectivity, digital adoption and enabling infrastructure as core conditions for growth in advanced and innovation-intensive sectors.**

This matters because **digital infrastructure underpins every other sector**. It **enables businesses to trade, automate, collaborate, access cloud services, deploy AI tools, manage supply chains and reach customers**. It is **fundamental to productivity, innovation and international competitiveness**, particularly in sectors where data, resilience and speed are critical. It is also a **tool for inclusive growth**: stronger connectivity helps reduce regional disparities by improving access to jobs, skills, services and markets, and by making a wider range of places viable for investment and business growth.

For the public sector, **digital infrastructure is a critical enabler of service transformation and improvement**. The *State of digital government review* (January 2025)[6] found that the UK public sector spends over £26 billion annually on digital technology and employs nearly 100,000 digital and data professionals, yet 47% of central government services and 45% of NHS services still lack a digital pathway.[6] The need for better digital public services is already clear, but **delivery depends on the availability and access to reliable digital infrastructure.**

In planning terms, connectivity can no longer be treated as an afterthought. The new National Planning Policy Framework, published in August 2026, restructures national planning policy for plan-making and decision-making and includes a dedicated section on supporting high-quality communications infrastructure, framed through policies

CO1 and CO2. This reinforces the expectation that planning should support modern communications networks and underlines the need for digital infrastructure to be embedded in Spatial Development Strategies, Local Plans and Local Growth Plans if those plans are to be credible, investable and future-ready.

National connectivity targets

The UK Government's headline ambition for fixed connectivity is to achieve nationwide gigabit-capable broadband coverage, with an expectation that **99% of premises will have access to a gigabit-capable connection by 2032** through a mix of commercial rollout and targeted intervention under Project Gigabit.[9]

For mobile, the *UK Wireless Infrastructure Strategy* sets a clear ambition to deliver **standalone 5G coverage to all populated areas of the UK by 2030**, alongside a wider commitment to high-quality 5G and improved wireless performance.[8]

These targets define the benchmark against which current progress should be judged. They underline how much of the remaining challenge lies in the hardest places.

Progress to date

Nationally, progress has been significant but incomplete.

Ofcom's *Connected Nations 2025* report, reported that gigabit capable networks were available to 87% of UK residential premises and full fibre to 78%, with full fibre also available to 78% of SMEs.[4] On mobile, Ofcom reported that good outdoor 4G coverage from at least one mobile operator reached around 96% of UK landmass, and that operators maintained 4G coverage outside to at least 99% of UK premises.[4]

Those figures are encouraging, but they can create a false sense of completion. Ofcom itself warns that while its mobile coverage reporting is generally effective for assessing average coverage across wide areas, it has limitations and introduces considerable uncertainty when attempting to assess coverage in a particular location, especially where signal strength is low.[4] In addition, capacity issues across mobile networks are largely undetected until the point of failure resulting in poor user experience, often impacting public safety and local economic activity. The same principle applies to fixed coverage: headline percentages are useful for national direction, but they can smooth out gaps at settlement edge, on industrial estates, in dispersed hamlets, or for properties that require wayleaves (legal access agreements) to connect. These issues are outlined in more detail in the sections below.

For local decision-making, national coverage data should therefore be treated as a strategic baseline rather than a site-level proxy for user experience. Local authorities need to test modelled coverage against local intelligence, resident and business experience, capacity and congestion evidence, indoor performance, transport corridors and known delivery barriers. This local validation is particularly important when prioritising the remaining hard to reach locations or challenging assumptions that an area is already adequately served.[4]

In short, the national picture may look strong while many individual communities and businesses remain poorly served. The impacts are compounded for the hardest to reach areas, which experience both poor fixed and poor mobile connectivity.

Fixed broadband issues: gigabit capable connections

Fixed broadband rollout is often presented through headline percentages, but those percentages can conceal a long tail of highly localised gaps. These include **"microgaps"** affecting small clusters of properties, individual roads, business parks, apartment blocks, infill sites and hard-to-serve edge locations.

Such gaps matter because they are precisely the places where residents, employers or public services can be excluded despite appearing to sit inside a generally well-served area. Maps and local intelligence are therefore essential: the challenge is no longer only about broad regional deficiency, but about pinpointing and solving increasingly granular coverage failures.

There is also a persistent business connectivity issue. Ofcom's *Connected Nations 2024* report[5] found that while full-fibre availability had reached 69% of UK households by July 2024, only 63% of UK SMEs were within reach of a full-fibre network at that point.[5] Although this improved to 78% of SMEs by July 2025,[4] the earlier gap is instructive: business locations do not always benefit at the same pace or in the same pattern as homes. That matters for productivity, investment and local growth. Weak digital infrastructure on employment sites constrains business performance, reduces the attractiveness of commercial space and undermines the effectiveness of wider economic development interventions.

Market failure must also be understood more broadly. It is still too often treated as a purely rural issue, when in reality it also appears in suburban fringes, market towns, coastal areas, dense urban settings with wayleave or multi-dwelling barriers, and commercial locations that are technically serviceable but not commercially attractive. Different forms of market failure include high build cost, low expected return, fragmented land ownership, planning friction, poor duct or power availability and uncertainty over demand. A useful way to frame this is not as a "rural problem", but as a spectrum of delivery barriers that can occur in very different places.

Mobile connectivity issues

The mobile challenge is now as much about capacity and quality as it is about basic coverage. Areas can appear "covered" on paper while still experiencing poor performance because networks are congested, indoor signal is weak, transport routes are inconsistent, or available spectrum and site density are insufficient for growing demand. As public services, businesses and residents rely more heavily on mobile data, capacity constraints become a direct brake on economic activity and service quality.

This is especially important for standalone 5G. The economic promise of 5G lies not simply in a stronger consumer signal, but in the step-change enabled by standalone architecture: lower latency, network slicing, greater resilience and support for advanced industrial and public service use cases. Ofcom's *Connected Nations 2025* was the first edition of the report to include standalone 5G coverage,[4] underlining that this is now the next phase of network maturity rather than a distant prospect. Yet deployment remains difficult. It requires denser infrastructure, fibre backhaul, access to power, streamlined planning, upgraded sites and faster local approvals. The GSMA's 2025 work on the transition to "Complete 5G" notes that only just over 70 operators globally – around 20% of those with 5G – had launched live standalone networks at that point,[8] illustrating that the move from non-standalone to standalone deployment is materially harder and slower than early 5G rollout.

Small cells are a key part of the answer, particularly in town centres, transport corridors, growth areas and dense urban environments. They are essential for adding capacity and enabling high-performing 5G networks, but they depend on local delivery conditions: access to street furniture and public assets, simple commercial models, power availability, fibre connections and consistent local authority processes. Without those foundations, national mobile ambitions will be harder to realise.

The economics of mobile deployment make this local role especially important. In commercially marginal locations, local authorities can help move schemes towards an investable "tipping point" by identifying demand and use cases, reducing capital and transaction costs through access to public assets, supporting early planning engagement, coordinating power and fibre backhaul, and encouraging passive or active infrastructure sharing where appropriate. These interventions do not replace private investment; they improve the local conditions in which private investment can proceed.

Impact of not achieving 99% coverage

Failing to achieve near-universal high quality fixed broadband and mobile coverage would carry economic and service delivery costs.

Economic impact of delayed rollout

"Delays in digital infrastructure rollout could cost the country tens of billions in lost economic output, while successful adoption of 5G and full fibre could deliver productivity gains worth over £200 billion by 2035. Closing the digital divide is therefore not just a social imperative, but an economic necessity."

Source: All Party Parliamentary Group Digital Communities report

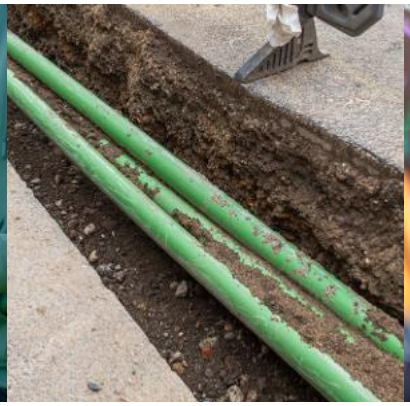
The strategic case is reflected across current government policy. The 10 Year Infrastructure Strategy[1] is explicit that infrastructure investment has been too erratic and too low, hampering productivity and wages, while the Modern Industrial Strategy[2] is built around increasing business investment and unlocking growth in sectors that are increasingly digital, data-driven and place sensitive.

In practice, good digital infrastructure increases productivity, expands labour market reach, supports innovation, enables flexible business models and strengthens a place's ability to attract and retain employers.

Poor coverage does the opposite: it suppresses business performance, limits adoption of digital tools, deters investment and deepens inequalities between places and between communities within the same place.

Delayed rollout also creates a compounding risk. It locks households and firms into interim technologies for longer than intended, encourages overreliance on ageing fibre-to-the-cabinet (FTTC) solutions or relatively more expensive alternatives such as low earth orbiting (LEO) satellite for use cases they are not best suited to serve, and weakens the business case for data-intensive transformation. **Too many programmes still assume that the infrastructure needed to move data already exists**. In reality, weak backhaul, patchy mobile performance and inconsistent fixed connectivity can become hidden blockers to housing growth, smart place initiatives, digital public services, innovation districts and modern logistics.






Case Study:

Cashless parking apps - when connectivity is assumed but not assured

The shift to cashless parking illustrates how everyday public services can fail when digital connectivity is treated as an assumption rather than a delivery requirement. Many local authorities have adopted app-based parking payments to reduce cash handling, maintenance and machine replacement costs, but these systems depend on a reliable mobile signal at the point of use.

Where car parks or on-street locations have a weak signal, network congestion or mobile dead spots, drivers can be unable to open apps, complete payments or confirm their location. The result can be failed transactions, customer frustration, appeals against Penalty Charge Notices, additional administrative costs for local authorities and lost trade for nearby businesses when visitors abandon trips.

The lesson is not that digital payment systems should be avoided, but that connectivity needs to be designed in from the outset. Digital infrastructure teams can help parking, transport and town centre teams test mobile coverage, identify blackspots, engage operators and consider solutions such as small cells, public Wi-Fi or other wireless improvements before new digital services go live. This turns connectivity from a hidden risk into a planned dependency.

There is also a clear inward investment dimension. Businesses choosing where to locate increasingly expect resilient fixed and mobile connectivity as standard. For advanced manufacturing, creative industries, professional services, logistics, health innovation, education and data-driven growth sectors, poor digital infrastructure is not a minor inconvenience; it is a location risk. Places that cannot demonstrate robust, scalable connectivity are less able to anchor existing employers, attract new investment or compete effectively in national and global markets.

Summary

The strategic message is clear. Digital infrastructure is foundational to growth, productivity, competitiveness and public service reform, but national progress should not be confused with completion.

The remaining gap is not marginal in its impact: it is concentrated in the places and premises where delivery is hardest and where the consequences of failure can be most acute. The final stretch will not simply fix itself through market momentum alone or via the delivery of nationally led interventions such as Building Digital UK's Project Gigabit contracts. It will require strong local facilitation, sharper planning, better use of public assets, closer coordination with operators, and a more granular understanding of where coverage, capacity and resilience still fall short.

This is why dedicated digital infrastructure capability within strategic authorities matters. County councils, combined authorities and other strategic bodies can play a critical role in unlocking the final stretch by coordinating local intelligence, aligning connectivity with growth and service priorities, resolving delivery barriers, convening operators and public bodies, and making practical use of public assets, planning levers and local partnerships.

Achieving the final stages of the 99% coverage ambition will be significantly harder, slower and more expensive without effective local facilitation. These areas require local support, informed intervention and sustained engagement on the ground; they will not be reached consistently through national policy or market delivery alone.

Furthermore, if digital infrastructure is to function as a true pillar of Spatial Development Strategies and Local Growth Plans, it must be planned, prioritised and actively enabled as core economic infrastructure.

Part 2 - WHY LOCAL TEAMS ARE ESSENTIAL

"Local digital infrastructure teams turn national connectivity ambition into local delivery."

KEY MESSAGES

- **Local teams are the delivery engine.** They turn national ambition into practical deployment by joining up operators, local authorities, communities and government.
- **They remove the barriers**. Wayleaves, assets, planning, street works, data and escalation routes all need local coordination.
- **They protect hard-to-serve places**. Local intelligence keeps rural, coastal, business, multi-dwelling and marginal areas visible when delivery becomes difficult.
- **Without them, places become passive**. Authorities lose the ability to shape investment, resolve problems and respond confidently when residents or businesses are left behind.

From strategy to delivery: the role of local digital infrastructure teams

Local digital infrastructure teams turn national connectivity ambition into local delivery. They bring the intelligence, relationships and problem-solving capacity needed to unlock investment, remove barriers and ensure that broadband, mobile and advanced wireless infrastructure reaches homes, businesses, public services and growth locations.

Without them, delivery fragments. Operators lack a clear route into the public sector; residents, businesses and Members lose a trusted escalation point; and authorities lose the ability to shape investment, resolve deployment barriers and protect the places most at risk of being left behind.

The call to action is clear: strategic authorities must design in, resource and protect dedicated digital infrastructure capability as a core function of growth, place-making and public service reform.

Local authorities as deployment enablers

"Regardless of how digital infrastructure is being rolled out, whether fixed or mobile and commercially or through government subsidised programmes, all deployment happens in local authority areas. This is why the role of local authorities as a key enabler is essential to maintain and accelerate the pace of telecoms deployment."

Source: Digital Connectivity Forum, Local Authorities as Connectivity Enablers

Key roles and responsibilities

A mature local digital infrastructure team can cover a wide range of functions:

- **Digital infrastructure strategy and policy development**. Digital infrastructure teams develop the local strategy, policy framework and evidence base for broadband, mobile and advanced wireless infrastructure. This aligns with the strategic authority's wider functions for economic growth, spatial planning, housing, transport and infrastructure, enabling connectivity to be planned as part of a coherent place-based investment framework rather than as a standalone service. The role includes translating national targets into local delivery priorities; embedding connectivity into Local Growth Plans and Spatial Development Strategies and ensuring that digital infrastructure is treated alongside transport, energy, water and housing as enabling infrastructure.

- **Operator and market engagement**. Digital infrastructure teams provide a single, knowledgeable interface for fixed broadband operators, mobile network operators, neutral hosts, tower companies and infrastructure investors. This is important because operators often work across large geographies and may deprioritise areas where local routes into planning, highways, estates or senior decision-makers are unclear. Local teams can convene regular operator forums, share local growth intelligence, facilitate access and coordinate escalation routes.

- **Wayleave and asset access facilitation**. Digital infrastructure teams help resolve one of the most common practical barriers to deployment: securing legal access to land, buildings and infrastructure. This can involve identifying landowners, explaining the public value of access, providing expertise to support negotiations, coordinating legal and estates input, and helping operators avoid stalled build. Without local facilitation, premises can remain unconnected even where funding, network design and supplier commitment are already in place.

- **Public sector estate utilisation**. Digital infrastructure teams can provide vital support to highways, property and housing teams to identify where public land, buildings, street furniture and streetlighting assets could support fibre, mobile, small cell or wireless deployment. This can include developing asset registers, standard access agreements and internal processes so that public assets can be used safely, consistently and transparently.

- **Rural connectivity interventions**. Digital infrastructure teams help deliver programmes such as Project Gigabit, voucher schemes and support for very hard-to-reach areas. They use local knowledge to confirm coverage gaps, support communities and suppliers, resolve access issues and escalate delivery risks. This is especially important when national data or eligibility rules do not reflect local experience.

- **Data and GIS analysis**. Digital infrastructure teams use local intelligence to identify where intervention is needed. They map fixed and mobile coverage, business parks, multi-dwelling buildings, housing sites, supplier plans and delivery constraints, and test coverage data against resident and business experience. This supports better targeting, stronger operator and government engagement, clearer Member briefings and more credible investment decisions.

- **Government engagement and programme escalation**. Digital infrastructure teams lead the strategic authority's relationship with government departments and agencies such as Building Digital UK and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. This includes responding to consultations, feeding local evidence into programme design, supporting procurement, resolving deployment barriers, and supporting local delivery.

- **Supporting and nurturing alternative network providers**. Digital infrastructure teams can help smaller suppliers understand local priorities, highways processes, and public sector contacts. This does not mean favouring individual companies; it means creating a more navigable local environment for credible investment. In some places, smaller or specialist suppliers may be better placed to serve rural clusters, business parks, or community-led schemes that are less attractive to large national operators.

- **Planning and street work coordination**. Digital infrastructure teams provide specialist knowledge to planning, transport and highways colleagues so that digital infrastructure is designed in early and deployed efficiently. Examples include advising on new development connectivity standards, encouraging fibre-ready ducting, supporting mobile mast and small cell applications, coordinating street works, and helping resolve permitting or reinstatement

issues. This reduces delay and disruption for residents and businesses and helps ensure that new housing, employment and regeneration sites are digitally enabled from the outset.

- **Neutral host and small cell coordination**. Digital infrastructure teams support the practical conditions needed for high-capacity mobile networks, including small cells, neutral host models and advanced wireless deployment. This can involve identifying suitable streetlighting columns or public buildings, negotiating legal access agreements, and developing consistent approaches for operators. This work matters because 5G and future mobile networks require denser infrastructure, especially in town centres and other high-demand locations.

- **Public Wi-Fi strategies**. Digital infrastructure teams can lead or advise on public Wi-Fi where there is a clear public value case, for example in town centres, libraries, or community hubs. The impact can include improved access for visitors and local businesses, better town-centre insight and more inclusive digital access for people who cannot rely on private connectivity.

- **Business connectivity support**. Many business issues are highly practical: landlord permissions, wayleaves, excess construction charges, poor mobile coverage, delayed installations or employment sites falling outside commercial rollout plans. Digital infrastructure teams provide a route for businesses, landlords, developers and operators to resolve these issues.

- **Cross-authority regional coordination**. Connectivity challenges and operator investment decisions do not follow local authority boundaries. Digital infrastructure teams support coordination across districts, unitary authorities, combined authorities, neighbouring counties and national programmes. This helps to align public assets, highways processes, planning approaches, growth priorities and supplier engagement across the geography that operators and residents actually experience.

This work also underpins wider strategic priorities, including:

- **Supporting inward investment and regeneration schemes**. Digital infrastructure teams can help ensure that major growth locations, employment sites and housing schemes are digitally ready from the outset. This means identifying connectivity constraints early and engaging with operators and developers before sites are built out.

- **Digital inclusion enablement**. Connectivity is only one part of inclusion, but without reliable and affordable fixed and mobile access, digital skills and service transformation programmes cannot reach their full impact. Digital infrastructure teams provide the evidence on where access barriers remain, help target public Wi-Fi or hub connectivity, and ensure that deprived, rural, coastal or otherwise excluded communities are not treated as an afterthought.

- **Smart places, IoT and digitisation of local authority services**. Smart transport, environmental monitoring, asset management, telecare, connected public buildings, CCTV, sensors and data-led place management all depend on resilient networks, power, backhaul and coverage. Digital infrastructure teams help make these initiatives deliverable by aligning connectivity with estates, highways, streetlighting, public Wi-Fi, LoRaWAN, 5G and fibre planning, so that smart place ambitions are grounded in practical infrastructure capability.

- **Economic growth**. Strong digital connectivity supports productivity, innovation, flexible working, cloud adoption and AI deployment. Digital infrastructure teams help translate this into place-based action by identifying business connectivity gaps, supporting employment sites, improving operator engagement and aligning deployment with local growth plans, industrial strategy priorities and sector development opportunities.

- **Supporting emergency resilience**. Reliable fixed and mobile networks are increasingly important for emergency response, severe weather events, community resilience, business continuity and access to critical public services. Digital infrastructure teams can help identify weak spots, engage mobile operators on coverage or capacity risks, and ensure that digital infrastructure is considered alongside wider resilience planning.

- **Enabling new ways of delivering health and social care**. Reliable fixed and mobile connectivity is increasingly essential for remote consultations, digital triage, virtual wards, telecare, remote monitoring and joined up working between health, social care and voluntary sector partners. It is essential to ensure that digital care models are not undermined by poor coverage or weak resilience.

- **Improving access to education and skills training**. High-quality connectivity supports online learning, digital skills programmes, and school/college access to cloud-based tools. Poor broadband or mobile coverage can limit access to learning, particularly in rural, coastal or deprived communities.

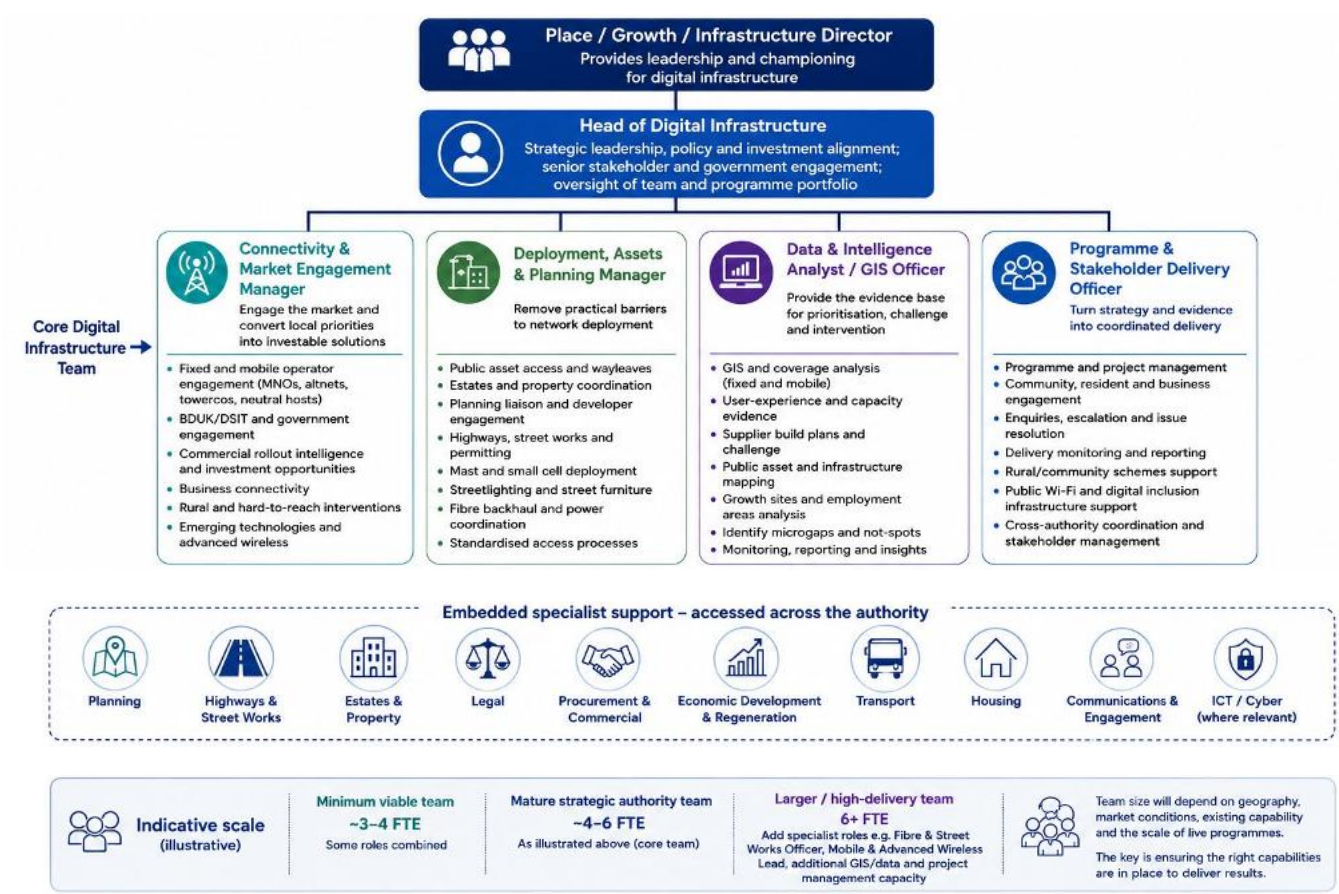
Taken together, these activities are not peripheral or optional. They are the delivery engine that turns national broadband, mobile and advanced wireless ambitions into real-world outcomes for places, businesses and communities.

Without local digital infrastructure teams, policy intent can remain disconnected from the practical conditions needed for deployment: planning alignment, street works coordination, public asset access, operator engagement, local intelligence and barrier removal.

Government guidance recognises that local authorities have a critical role in enabling deployment and that collaboration between authorities and providers is essential if the economic and social benefits of next-generation connectivity are to be realised.[19] [20]

Digital Infrastructure Team Illustrative Structure

Example of a strategic authority team turning connectivity ambition into local delivery



What happens if these teams do not exist?

Digital infrastructure teams are often small, but they unlock disproportionately significant economic and social value. Their absence may not be immediately visible, but the consequences emerge over time: missed investment opportunities, slower deployment, weaker supplier relationships, poorer local intelligence and reduced ability to intervene when national programmes or commercial rollout fail to reach the places that need support most.

This matters because connectivity is experienced directly by residents and businesses in everyday life: through unreliable home working, weak mobile signal, difficulty accessing online services, disrupted card payments, and barriers to education, health and care support. Local teams provide the evidence, relationships and escalation routes needed to understand these issues properly, test coverage claims against lived experience and support senior officers and members when concerns intensify.

The consequences of losing, weakening or failing to establish this capability are therefore practical, cumulative and difficult to reverse:

- **Operators can face fragmented local routes into planning, highways, estates and senior decision-making, making the area harder to work with and less attractive for investment**. This can frequently result in premises being descoped from build programmes and digital infrastructure investment lost to the area.
- **Deployment barriers such as wayleaves, permits, asset access, reinstatement issues and public sector approvals can remain unresolved** for longer, delaying or even preventing broadband, mobile and advanced wireless build.
- **Residents, businesses, Members and MPs lose a clear point of contact for enquiries, complaints and escalation** when coverage data does not match lived experience or when rollout creates disruption. Senior officers and members do not have access to specialist support to manage these issues when concerns escalate.
- **Growth sites, business parks, regeneration areas and new housing developments may not be connectivity-ready**, weakening investor confidence and risking costly retrofitting later. In many instances, operators can be reluctant to retrofit infrastructure.
- **Public assets such as land, buildings, rooftops, street furniture and streetlighting may remain underused**, reducing opportunities to support fibre, small cell, neutral host or wireless deployment. *Changes in the Electronic Communications Code have also meant that local authorities without a coordinated response can face expensive legal proceedings when requests to site or route infrastructure are not properly managed.*
- **Rural, coastal, deprived and commercially marginal communities are more likely to fall between national programmes and market-led delivery**, with no local team to evidence gaps or press for solutions. This can lead to poorer coverage than in strategic authorities that have a strong digital infrastructure advocacy function.
- **Opportunities linked to AI, smart places, telecare, connected transport, public Wi-Fi and emergency resilience** can be constrained because the underlying connectivity, backhaul and asset access have not been planned in. Sometimes, the risks associated with connectivity can be underestimated because the headline data leads to digitisation programme assumptions that the connectivity is already there.
- Strategic or devolved authorities may inherit fragmented data, inconsistent processes and weak supplier relationships, making it harder to coordinate investment across a wider geography.
- Most importantly, local knowledge can disappear. Once staff, relationships, coverage intelligence, supplier history and practical problem-solving expertise have been lost, the function is difficult and slow to re-establish. Recreating it later means rebuilding trust, data, contacts and institutional memory from scratch.

The central risk is that local authorities and strategic authorities become passive observers of network rollout rather than active enablers of it. Without a dedicated team, there is no obvious function to hold the map of local need, field enquiries, challenge assumptions, convene partners, unblock delivery or protect the interests of places that are easiest to overlook. This is why digital infrastructure capability should be preserved through organisational change: once the local expertise is lost, it cannot be recreated quickly at the point it is most needed.

Case Study:

OpenAccess West Sussex- accelerating commercial deployment of small cells

OpenAccess West Sussex is West Sussex County Council's initiative to remove barriers to connectivity improvement. It focuses on the strategic management and use of physical and digital assets. Through public/ private collaboration it is opening access to public sector buildings, land and assets to enable faster, smoother deployment of digital infrastructure, particularly small cells, by telecoms partners and support smarter use of the publicly owned estate.

The County Council works across seven District and Borough local authorities. It offers scaled and consistent approaches to all suppliers on a non-exclusive basis to simplify access agreements, planning processes and highways management. This has lowered capital costs and improved the commercial case for small cell network expansion.

It's not solely about leveraging policies and process. OpenAccess West Sussex is also investing in erecting fibred and powered publicly owned street assets, strategically located in places of high demand and footfall. By making multi-purpose street columns available as Local Authority Permitted Development, the Council has significantly lowered the commercial threshold for investment in improved mobile capacity and coverage and enabled providers to focus resources on delivery rather than negotiation. Recent collaborations in Worthing and Chichester are a blueprint for accelerated commercial investment in 4G/5G/5GSA hosted on public sector assets.

Local authorities are uniquely positioned to "convene" strong cross industry collaboration across telecommunications operators, mobile network providers, neutral hosts, central government and local authorities to align asset use, reduce duplication and share knowledge. By speaking the same language as industry and embedding this approach within our digital spatial planning approach, we have built trust and are forging long term partnerships that simplify deployment at scale.

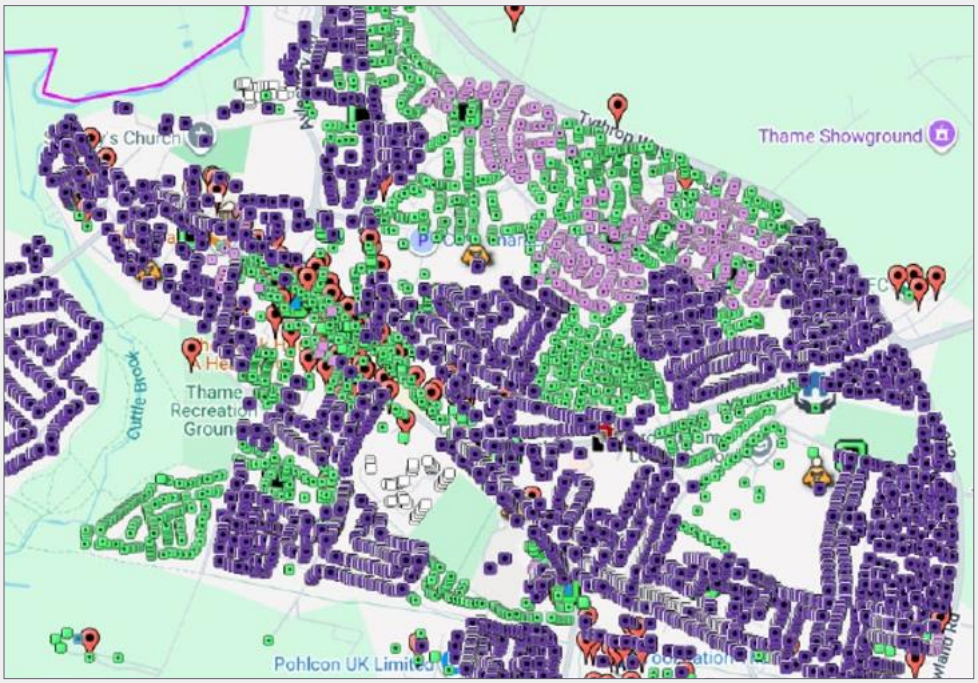
OpenAccess West Sussex, like many other local authorities, are directly removing key barriers - cost, time, exclusivity and complexity- while enabling collaboration across industry and public partners. West Sussex's approach, similar to many other local authorities, is a practical, scalable and replicable model for accelerating connectivity improvement and ensuring that digital infrastructure benefits all communities. By using our physical assets proactively, we are creating the physical conditions that drive innovation, connectivity and sustainable growth across regions throughout the UK.

Worthing provides a practical example of why this capacity matters. West Sussex reports that the solution required active intervention by the digital infrastructure team across planning, communities, businesses and telecoms investors, including use of the Part 12 permitted development route. The case demonstrates that a location can appear covered while still suffering capacity constraints - and that local convening, planning knowledge and asset coordination can be decisive in moving an investable solution forward.

Case Study:

Oxfordshire - local capability turning evidence into delivery

Oxfordshire provides three practical examples of why dedicated local digital infrastructure capability matters: identifying highly localised gaps, removing deployment barriers and creating the evidence needed to improve mobile connectivity.[26]



Thame: Oxfordshire local coverage analysis supplied by the digital infrastructure team. Purple premises are gigabit-connected; the high street contains a concentrated line of poorer-performing premises.[26]

***Addressing a localised broadband hole in Thame**. Thame high street is described as an island of very poor broadband surrounded by FTTP, with buried copper connections making conventional fibre installation commercially difficult. Oxfordshire's team engaged Teleaura, a supplier new to the UK, to develop an unsubsidised 5G mm-wave FWAS network. The team coordinated the town council, supplier, businesses and residents and helped make the town hall and existing lighting columns available to host telecoms equipment - work requiring local knowledge across planning, street works and different tiers of local government.*

***Removing barriers through specialist street works expertise**. Oxfordshire employs a Fibre Advisory Officer with street works and fibre-deployment experience. The authority reports that this role has been pivotal in resolving delivery barriers for operator contractors while maintaining standards of build and remedial work and has helped enable investment by altnets including Netomnia and Airband as well as Openreach.*

***Building the evidence base for mobile intervention**. Oxfordshire also commissioned Digital Places to evidence mobile coverage and capacity problems, support practical interventions and strengthen engagement with planning authorities and mobile network operators. The approach illustrates how a local team can move beyond headline coverage data to identify user-experience problems and turn evidence into targeted action.*

***What this demonstrates**. These examples are not grant administration. They combine granular local intelligence, operator engagement, public asset access, planning and street works coordination and market facilitation. They show how a relatively small specialist function can create the conditions for private investment and practical solutions that would be much less likely to emerge without a dedicated local team.*

Case Study:

Kent County Council: Facilitating connectivity for hard to reach rural areas

***Using vouchers to reach places outside mainstream rollout**. Between September 2019 and April 2022, Kent County Council piloted and ran a local voucher top-up scheme to strengthen the national Rural Gigabit Voucher Scheme and make full fibre deployment viable for rural communities that were too hard, too costly or too dispersed for commercial rollout alone. The scheme helped connect more than 8,000 harder-to-reach rural premises to full fibre broadband, demonstrating how targeted local intervention can turn national funding into delivery on the ground.*

***The local authority role was central to delivery**. The experience in Kent, and the other counties where voucher top up schemes were subsequently deployed, showed that voucher schemes are not self-delivering. Communities needed help to understand eligibility, aggregate demand, work with suppliers, interpret coverage and funding rules, and overcome practical barriers such as wayleaves, land ownership, access constraints and local objections. The county broadband team provided the trusted local interface between residents, parish councils, suppliers, Members and Building Digital UK, helping projects move from local interest to viable build.*

***Part of a wider national pattern of local delivery before Project Gigabit**. Kent was one of many county council teams that had already been using local knowledge, data, community relationships and practical problem-solving to improve broadband connectivity before the Project Gigabit programme came online. Across the country, local teams had been sense-checking build plans, identifying missed premises, preventing avoidable overbuild, resolving deployment barriers and supporting community-led solutions in places that national datasets or standard supplier processes could easily overlook.*

***What this demonstrates**. The Kent voucher top-up scheme illustrates why achieving the Government's 99% gigabit-capable coverage ambition will require more than central programme management and national procurement. The remaining premises are often the most fragmented, costly and operationally complex to connect. Centralised approaches can set the framework and provide funding, but they will struggle to identify, prioritise and solve every local barrier without digital infrastructure teams acting as informed delivery partners on the ground. Local digital infrastructure teams bring the intelligence, relationships and persistence needed to keep harder-to-reach communities visible, broker practical solutions and ensure that public investment reaches the places most at risk of being left behind.*






Case Study:

Berkshire DIG - what can be lost when a strategic function is removed

***The model before disbanding**. Berkshire DIG brought all six Berkshire unitary authorities together under a single strategic collaboration, led by West Berkshire Council. It evolved from the Superfast Berkshire programme into a broader "Connected Berkshire" function spanning fixed and mobile connectivity, public assets, planning and wayleaves, data, market engagement and innovation. Earlier joint working secured external funding and delivered initiatives including full-fibre connections to public sites, the Digital Connectivity Infrastructure Accelerator pilot and shared "Dig Once" approaches.*[21]

***Why it was disbanded**. In September 2025, the Berkshire Prosperity Board agreed to disband DIG, serve six months' notice on the delivery support contract and consult on closing the three DIG posts. The formal rationale was that the original superfast broadband purpose of the function had largely been overtaken by national Project Gigabit coverage, with residual budget and future gainshare arrangements to be redirected through the wider prosperity governance structure.*[21]

***What changed next**. The decision illustrates the risk of equating progress on one national programme with completion of the wider local digital infrastructure role. In May 2026, BDUK and CityFibre redesigned the Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and East Berkshire Project Gigabit contract from around 34,000 premises backed by £58 million to around 6,000 premises backed by £24.4 million, following expanded commercial rollout and changing market conditions. BDUK stated that discussions with other suppliers were continuing for premises not covered by rollout plans.*[22]

***The capability gap**. At the point when the national intervention changed materially, Berkshire no longer had the same dedicated cross-authority team to maintain a single local evidence base, test coverage assumptions, coordinate the six local authorities, support communities and businesses affected by residual gaps, or provide one strategic interface to government and the telecoms market. The risk is not simply slower broadband delivery: it is the loss of a regional capability able to respond to mobile capacity, advanced wireless, public-asset, planning, inclusion, IoT and inward-investment opportunities as they emerge.*

***Lesson for local government review**. National programmes can reduce a particular delivery requirement without removing the need for local capability. The function needs to evolve with the market - from administering subsidy programmes to facilitating investment, solving residual gaps, coordinating assets and planning, and aligning connectivity with growth and public service transformation. Once the team, relationships and institutional memory are removed, rebuilding them when the next challenge appears is slower and more expensive.*

Summary

Local digital infrastructure teams are not optional specialist telecoms teams. They are enabling functions for economic growth, public service reform, inward investment, resilience, inclusion and place-making.

They help strategic authorities translate national connectivity ambitions into practical delivery, ensure that hard-to-reach communities and complex sites are not left behind, and provide the local intelligence and convening power needed to make digital infrastructure work as a genuine foundation for modern places.

Part 3 - LOCAL GOVERNMENT REVIEW

"The function should be designed into future operating models at the right, strategic scale."

KEY MESSAGES

- **Local government review is a design moment**. It is an opportunity to build digital infrastructure capability into new operating models from the outset.
- **The function should sit with place, not ICT**. Its value comes from links to growth, planning, transport, regeneration, estates and economic development.
- **Strategic authority scale matters**. A wider geography gives operators a clearer interface and helps preserve specialist expertise and market intelligence.
- **Strategic leadership and local delivery are complementary**. The strategic team provides specialist expertise, evidence and a coherent operator interface, but must work through the statutory functions, assets and delivery processes held by the new unitary authorities.
- **Transition must protect capability**. Data, supplier relationships, public asset knowledge and escalation routes need to be retained before structures change.

Local government review and, in many areas, local government reorganisation is the process through which existing local authority structures are reconsidered and, where government decides, replaced by new governance arrangements such as unitary authorities and strategic authorities.[10]

In England, current reforms are intended to simplify fragmented structures, reduce duplication and create clearer accountability, while devolution policy is increasingly placing strategic responsibilities such as transport, housing, economic growth and infrastructure at a larger geography.[10 11]

This matters directly to digital infrastructure teams because connectivity is not a narrow ICT issue: it is a cross-cutting place issue that supports growth, planning, transport, public service reform and inclusion. If the function is not consciously designed into the future operating model, there is a significant risk that it becomes fragmented, downgraded or treated as a purely technical back-office service at the very point when digital infrastructure needs to be embedded into strategic planning and growth delivery.

Digital infrastructure teams can also be enablers of the reorganisation and transformation process itself. Statutory service teams may understand their service requirements but may not hold the telecoms market relationships, commercial insight or infrastructure evidence needed to innovate at pace. Retaining a specialist function during transition helps connect service redesign with the networks, assets and supplier relationships on which new delivery models depend.

The recommendations in this part are grounded in the experience of local government reorganisations undertaken to date. The cases reviewed do not establish that only one organisational form can succeed, but they point consistently towards preserving specialist capability at county, combined-authority or equivalent strategic scale - or through a shared or hosted arrangement where several successor councils are created- rather than unnecessarily disaggregating it.

Where should the digital infrastructure function sit following local government review?

Following review, the digital infrastructure function is usually most effective when it sits within a **place-making, growth, regeneration, transport or strategic planning directorate**, rather than being absorbed solely into corporate ICT. That is because the function is primarily outward facing and about enabling infrastructure in places by:

- Facilitating local deployments and removing any barriers preventing investment and build;
- Reusing public assets;
- Aligning with transport and highways works;
- Influencing planning and regeneration;
- Supporting economic development; and
- Ensuring that growth locations and service transformation programmes are digitally enabled from the outset.

Positioning it in a place-making directorate helps ensure that digital infrastructure is treated alongside other enabling infrastructure, such as transport, utilities and housing, and gives the team the relationships and levers it needs across planning, highways, estates, regeneration and economic development.

> **Telecoms investors increasingly favour places where planning, public assets, highways and stakeholder engagement are well coordinated**. A dedicated digital infrastructure team can provide a clear route into the public sector, reduce transaction costs and delivery risk, and help align connectivity investment with wider growth ambitions. This can make places more attractive to both public and private investment.

The function also works best at the scale of a strategic authority rather than being spread thinly across several smaller unitary authorities. Telecoms operators can find it difficult and commercially challenging to work across multiple smaller local authorities with different processes and points of contact. Network markets, operator investment decisions, transport corridors, labour markets and growth geographies do not stop at district or unitary boundaries. A strategic authority is better able to provide:

- A single regional interface for operators (who have limited capacity to engage);
- Scalability and longer term, strategic partnerships;
- Market intelligence across a wider geography;
- Alignment of digital infrastructure with spatial development strategies and local growth plans;
- Access to public assets and wayleaves at scale; and
- Prioritisation of investment where the economic and social case is strongest.

This is not simply an internal local government design issue. Telecoms operators make investment and deployment decisions across wider commercial geographies and have limited capacity to manage multiple local relationships, processes and escalation routes. Where the local public-sector interface is fragmented across several smaller councils, operators may deprioritise engagement, delay escalation or focus planned investment in areas where there is a clearer strategic partner and lower delivery risk.

Digital infrastructure teams also need to have sufficient critical mass. A single expert can hold valuable knowledge, but a one-person function is inherently fragile. Effective teams need enough capacity to combine technical understanding, commercial engagement, GIS and data capability, stakeholder management, programme delivery, policy input and practical problem-solving. They also need access to legal, procurement, planning, highways and estates expertise so that issues can be resolved rather than simply recorded.

This capability should be treated as an investment in place rather than a discretionary overhead. Many of the benefits - investment unlocked, avoided deployment delay, better use of public assets, improved service resilience and long-term productivity gains - accrue across multiple budgets and over several years. Strategic authorities should therefore use proportionate impact and value frameworks to make both quick wins and longer-term returns visible when making resourcing decisions.

Strategic authorities are more likely to sustain specialist staff with the commercial, technical, planning and programme management expertise needed for broadband, mobile and advanced wireless programmes. By contrast, dispersing the function across several small councils risks inconsistency, duplication, weaker market engagement and loss of critical mass.[11]

A collaborative operating model

Retaining digital infrastructure capability at strategic scale does not mean that the strategic team can, or should, deliver the agenda alone. Many of the powers, assets and operational processes needed to enable deployment will sit within the new unitary authorities. These include planning, highways permitting and street works coordination, housing, estates and property, transport planning and economic development. The future model therefore needs to combine strategic leadership with structured collaboration across the constituent authorities.

The strategic digital infrastructure team should act as the specialist centre of expertise: maintaining the evidence base, leading engagement with government and the telecoms market, coordinating cross-boundary programmes, identifying investment opportunities and escalating barriers. The unitary authorities should retain clear responsibility for exercising their statutory powers, managing local assets and embedding connectivity within local plans, development decisions, housing programmes, road-space management and regeneration delivery. Neither layer is sufficient on its own.

The most effective arrangement is likely to have three mutually reinforcing layers:

- **A strategic digital infrastructure team** responsible for regional strategy, data and Geographic Information System analysis, operator and government engagement, Project Gigabit, mobile connectivity, investment facilitation and cross-boundary issues.
- **A formal officer network** comprising named leads from planning, development management, highways and street works, housing, estates and economic development, in each unitary authority. It should meet regularly to share intelligence, align processes and resolve delivery barriers.
- **A senior governance board** bringing together the strategic authority and constituent councils to set priorities, oversee performance, manage interdependencies and unblock issues that cannot be resolved through officer-level coordination.

This arrangement should be underpinned by agreed terms of reference, named points of contact, shared deployment guidance, consistent data standards, common operator engagement and escalation processes, and clear service-level or partnership agreements where one authority hosts the strategic team. The design test is therefore not only where the specialist function sits, but whether the wider system enables it to mobilise the local levers required for delivery.

How the function has been accommodated to date

Under the previous county council model, county-wide digital infrastructure teams commonly sat in economic development, environment, growth or place-facing directorates and operated across the whole county geography, giving them the scale to manage supplier relationships, public subsidy programmes, GIS intelligence and cross-council coordination.

More recently, a number of combined and mayoral strategic authorities have maintained or developed regional digital functions. For example, **South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority** has a dedicated digital infrastructure team supporting regional connectivity strategy and delivery; **Greater Manchester Combined Authority** has a digital function framed around city-region priorities and place-based digital strategy; and **West Midlands Combined Authority** has positioned digital within its broader regional growth and innovation agenda.[12] [13] [14] These models reflect an important principle: the digital infrastructure function is strongest when it is able to work across a meaningful economic geography with sufficient scale, convening power and strategic visibility.

Disaggregating the digital infrastructure function: risks and issues

Disaggregating the function across several small unitaries creates both direct costs and wider delivery problems.

Direct costs would include duplicating posts, systems, governance arrangements, contract management, procurement support, GIS capability, legal support for wayleaves and telecoms agreements, and officer time spent reproducing similar work in each authority. There would also be **transition costs** linked to service redesign, data separation, novation or reallocation of contracts, and the loss of staff time during restructure.

The wider issues are arguably more significant: smaller teams may be too small to retain specialist expertise; operators may face different processes, contacts and expectations in neighbouring areas; intelligence and asset data may become fragmented; and no single body may retain a clear line of sight across the full geography. This can weaken bargaining power, slow deployment, increase transaction costs for suppliers and public bodies alike, and make it harder to align connectivity with strategic priorities such as housing growth, transport corridors, employment sites and public sector estate rationalisation.

A fragmented model can also create a market-facing risk. If operators are required to engage separately with multiple smaller authorities, each with different processes, priorities and access routes, the area may become less competitive for investment compared with places offering a single strategic interface. In the worst case, planned investment could be slowed, reprioritised or redirected towards areas where engagement is simpler and delivery risks are lower.

Risks around failing to consider digital infrastructure needs within the local government review process

If the function is not properly planned for, there is a risk of a damaging capability gap during transition. Programmes can lose momentum just as major procurements, commercial build decisions or policy reforms are moving ahead. Relationships with telecoms operators, suppliers, government departments and internal services can weaken if there is uncertainty about who leads the agenda.

Knowledge about local coverage gaps, public assets, community demand, planning barriers and existing interventions can be lost if staff leave or if records are not transferred well.

Internally, digital infrastructure may become disconnected from planning, highways, estates and regeneration decisions, meaning that opportunities are missed and barriers are not resolved early. Externally, the consequence can be slower rollout, poorer targeting of interventions, weaker support for hard-to-reach areas, reduced readiness for advanced wireless deployment and less ability to influence national and commercial programmes.

In short, failure to plan for the function can produce a false saving in organisational design while creating real economic and service-delivery costs on the ground.

Planning checklist: see Appendix 1

To support this planning process, **Appendix 1 provides a practical checklist** for local authorities and strategic authorities to use when designing future operating models. It sets out the key questions that should be tested before decisions are made, including where the function should sit, whether it is being retained at the right geographic scale, how specialist capability and data will be protected, and how operator engagement, public assets and wider place-based priorities will be coordinated through transition.

Case Study:

West of England Mayoral Combined Authority

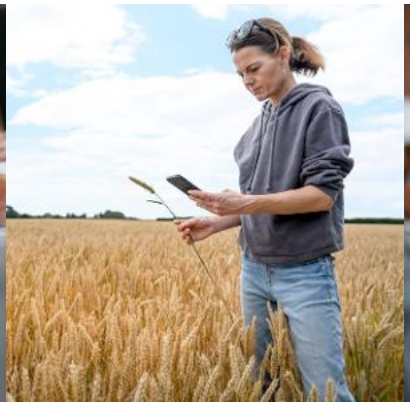
The West of England Mayoral Combined Authority (WECA) established its Digital Office as a new regional coordination function in February 2025, working across three unitary authorities - Bath & North East Somerset, Bristol and South Gloucestershire. It is a small central team within the Combined Authority, acting as a single point of contact for telecoms operators, infrastructure providers and the three local authorities, operating four service functions - Concierge, Data, Outreach and Streamlined Processes - governed jointly with a Council Working Group.

The model was grounded in evidence: a Strategic Outline Case found regional coordination to be the single most impactful, cost-effective intervention available, forecasting c.£95m in economic and wellbeing benefit over 15 years. That evidence also underpinned a deliberate policy choice to prioritise maximising superfast (≥30Mbps) coverage for the greatest number of premises, alongside gigabit-capable infrastructure where achievable, rather than pursuing gigabit or fibre targets alone. This approach delivers greater regional benefit and avoids leaving the hardest-to-reach premises behind.

In its first operating year, the Digital Office has evidenced measurable impact: a well-used regional engagement point for providers, tangible small cell deployment progress across all three local authorities - including in an area where deployment had previously stalled - and connectivity data used to directly influence BDUK's Project Gigabit targeting, with underserved premises incorporated into BDUK's quarterly review process.

A West of England Digital Infrastructure Advisory Group (DIAG), launched in April 2025 and meeting quarterly, brings external experts and operators together to advise on cross-cutting issues, mirroring similar structures in Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region.

The Digital Office is funded as a pilot to October 2027, with its continuation beyond that point under active consideration, informed by the impact evidence the pilot is designed to produce. Its impact to date supports this toolkit's core argument: that a regional coordination function can be delivered at combined/strategic authority level - provided it is properly resourced, positioned within the right, place-based directorate from the outset and designed to strengthen rather than duplicate the work of constituent local authorities.



Case Study:

Cumbria: how the function has been planned for where the programme operates across two unitary authorities

*Cumbria provides a useful illustration of transitional planning. Following local government reorganisation, the **Connecting Cumbria** programme has continued to operate across **Cumberland Council** and **Westmorland and Furness Council**, rather than being immediately fragmented between the two authorities.*

Public reporting indicates that the programme works on behalf of both local authorities, with hosting arrangements through Cumberland and governance oversight retained at a Cumbria-wide level.[15] [16] That approach has allowed continuity for Project Gigabit, voucher support, mobile coverage work and 5G activity while the new local authorities bed in.

*It also reflects the practical reality that telecoms markets and digital infrastructure needs remain county-wide even where service delivery local authorities have changed. Cumbria's position has also evolved further through devolution: both local authorities consented in 2025 to a new mayor-led strategic authority for the county, with the **Cumbria Combined Authority** established in 2026 to work on county-wide priorities including transport, planning, skills and local development.[17] [18]*

Taken together, the Cumbria example suggests that, even where there is an interim period without a fully mature strategic authority, the digital infrastructure function can and should be held at a wider geography, with shared governance and hosting arrangements that preserve expertise, continuity and strategic coherence until the long-term model is in place.

Summary

Local government review is a critical design moment for digital infrastructure capability. The function should be deliberately built into future operating models at the right scale, in the right directorate and with sufficient capacity to provide strategic leadership. It should not, however, be presented as a self-contained delivery function: success will depend on formal collaboration with the planning, highways and street works, housing, estates and economic development functions located within the new unitary authorities.

The evidence from **local government reviews to date, and the lessons learned from those reorganisations**, points strongly towards retaining specialist capability at strategic authority scale, or across an equivalent wider geography, rather than splitting it across multiple smaller councils. This preserves expertise, provides a coherent operator interface and protects data and relationships. It must be complemented by a formal officer network, shared processes and senior cross-authority governance so that the strategic capability can work effectively through the statutory powers, assets and delivery responsibilities of the constituent councils.

Appendix 1 provides a supporting checklist for local authorities and strategic authorities to use when testing future operating models. **The checklist should be used alongside figure 1 below** to ensure that the core assets of the function are identified, protected and carried forward through transition.

Figure 1: What strategic authorities need to carry forward

THE ESSENTIALS FOR FUTURE DELIVERY

The value of a digital infrastructure function sits in the local capability, evidence, relationships and practical levers that make delivery possible.

1 **CAPABILITY**

Specialist expertise, capacity and continuity to lead digital infrastructure as a place-based function.

2 **DATA**

Coverage evidence, GIS analysis, supplier intelligence, demand data and local validation of national datasets.

3 **RELATIONSHIPS**

Trusted routes into operators, government, communities, Members, districts, parishes and internal services.

4 **PUBLIC ASSET ACCESS**

Practical use of land, buildings, rooftops, highways, street furniture, lighting columns and wayleaves.

5 **PLANNING INFLUENCE**

Early alignment with spatial planning, highways, regeneration, growth locations and new development.

6 **OPERATOR INTERFACE**

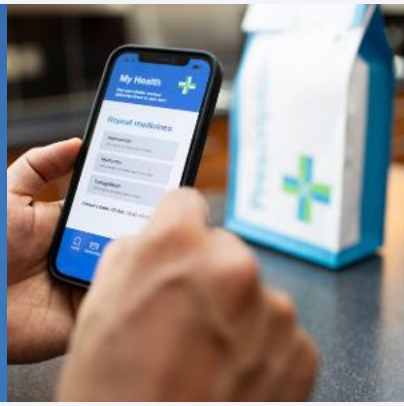
A coherent, strategic route for telecoms operators, infrastructure providers and national programmes.

7 **DELIVERY PROBLEM-SOLVING**

The ability to unblock wayleaves, permits, access, local objections, escalation routes and residual gaps.

If these assets are protected, strategic authorities can turn connectivity ambition into local delivery. If they are lost, places risk weaker investment, slower rollout and a long rebuilding period just when digital infrastructure matters most.



CONCLUSION

"Connectivity is increasingly experienced in the same way as transport, energy and water: as a basic condition for participating in modern life."

Digital infrastructure is the foundation on which modern places will compete, grow and serve their communities. It determines whether businesses can invest with confidence, whether public services can transform, whether residents can access opportunity and whether growth locations are genuinely ready for the future. It is no longer a specialist telecoms issue sitting at the edge of local government; it is core economic, social and public service infrastructure.

National programmes and commercial investment have taken the UK a long way, but the hardest places remain. The final stretch of broadband, mobile and advanced wireless delivery will depend on local intelligence, trusted relationships, practical facilitation and the ability to solve problems on the ground. Those are precisely the capabilities that dedicated digital infrastructure teams provide.

The experience of local government reorganisations reviewed in this toolkit points consistently towards retaining specialist digital infrastructure capability at strategic scale, or through a shared or hosted arrangement across successor local authorities, rather than unnecessarily splitting it. This is not presented as proof that only one structure can work; it is the clearest evidence-led direction from practice to date. As devolution increasingly places responsibility for growth, transport, planning and infrastructure at strategic authority level, digital infrastructure should be treated in the same way. Local government review should strengthen, not dilute, the specialist function by locating it at the right scale within place-based structures. Strategic location alone is not enough: the future model must also create durable links with the planning, housing, highways, estates and economic development functions in the new unitary authorities, because these functions hold many of the statutory powers, assets and operational levers on which delivery depends. A single strategic team, a formal cross-authority officer network and senior joint governance should therefore be established.

The choice is simple: places that plan, resource and protect digital infrastructure capability will be better placed to unlock growth, attract investment, improve services and support communities. Places that do not will find that weak connectivity becomes a hidden constraint on almost every ambition they hold.







Appendix 1: CHECKLIST

Checklist for local government review and digital infrastructure teams

This checklist is intended to help those designing new governance and operating models through local government review ensure that digital infrastructure capability is not overlooked, fragmented or under-resourced. It draws on the key points in this toolkit about why digital infrastructure matters, why specialist local capability is required, and why the function is most effective when located within place-making structures and operating at strategic scale.

✓	Checklist question
☐	**Has digital infrastructure been recognised as a strategic function?** Consider whether the future model treats connectivity as enabling economic growth, planning, transport, service reform and inclusion, rather than as a narrow ICT matter.
☐	**Is the function located in the right directorate?** Check whether it sits within place-making, growth, regeneration, transport or strategic planning, with the relationships and levers needed across planning, highways, estates and economic development.
☐	**Is the function being designed at the right geographic scale?** Assess whether digital infrastructure capability is being held at strategic authority level, or across an equivalent wider geography, rather than unnecessarily fragmented across several small councils.
☐	**Has the review considered the risks of unnecessary disaggregation?** The default position should be to retain digital infrastructure capability at strategic authority scale, or across an equivalent wider geography. Any proposal to split the function across multiple unitary authorities should only proceed where the review has explicitly evidenced how it will avoid duplication, fragmented data, weaker operator engagement, loss of specialist expertise, reduced critical mass and higher transition costs.
☐	**Has a collaborative operating model been agreed?** Confirm that the strategic team is linked to named leads in every unitary authority for planning, highways, housing, estates and economic development.
☐	**Has sufficient staffing and expertise been identified?** Ensure there is capacity for commercial engagement, supplier management, planning and policy input, asset coordination, GIS and data analysis, programme delivery, and stakeholder management.
☐	**Has continuity been planned for during transition?** Identify how knowledge, contracts, supplier relationships, local intelligence, asset data and live programmes will be retained so that capability is not lost during reorganisation.
☐	**Are shared processes and escalation routes in place?** Agree regular officer meetings, common guidance, consistent operator routes and a mechanism for escalating cross-authority barriers to senior governance.

✓	Checklist question *(continued...)*
☐	**Are governance and accountability arrangements clear?** Confirm who will lead the function, who will hold strategic oversight, and how decisions will be taken across planning, transport, regeneration, estates and digital delivery.
☐	**Are public assets and local levers being considered strategically?** Check that the future model enables coordinated use of highways, street furniture, buildings, land, wayleaves and planning levers to support fixed and mobile deployment.
☐	**Is the function linked to wider strategic planning?** Ensure connectivity is being aligned with spatial development strategies, local growth plans, transport corridors, housing growth, employment sites and public service transformation priorities.
☐	**Has the future operating model considered both broadband and mobile?** Avoid designing the function too narrowly around fixed broadband only; the team should also be equipped to support mobile coverage, small cells, advanced wireless and emerging infrastructure needs.
☐	**Is there a plan to maintain a single interface for operators and suppliers?** Consider whether the proposed model will give telecoms operators, infrastructure providers and government programmes a coherent route into the area, rather than multiple disconnected points of contact.
☐	**Has the review considered what could happen if the function is not resourced properly?** Test the consequences of under-resourcing, including loss of momentum, reduced investment readiness, missed opportunities, fragmented delivery and weaker support for hard-to-reach communities.

This checklist should be read alongside:

Figure 1: What strategic authorities need to carry forward

THE ESSENTIALS FOR FUTURE DELIVERY

(see p.27) which highlights the core assets that strategic authorities should protect and carry forward through transition.

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