

Ministers call on councils to help deliver digital connectivity ambitions

- Updated guidance to speed up agreements between the public sector and telcos
- New plain English guide for councils to tackle misinformation about 5G safety
- Calls for councillors to play a greater role in local digital strategies

Government ministers are calling on local councils to help ensure people can access better broadband and mobile connectivity crucial to the UK's coronavirus recovery.

Digital Infrastructure Minister Matt Warman and Local Government Minister Simon Clarke have today written to local authorities setting out how they can help boost gigabit broadband rollout and 5G mobile coverage.

The ministers urge councils to follow new government advice on land access and valuations so deals granting access for new infrastructure such as 5G masts and full fibre broadband cabinets on public land can be reached quicker and with reasonable rents attached.

Central government has also shared new guidance on the safety and benefits of 5G so councils can give people the facts and tackle disinformation about this revolutionary mobile technology.

It follows a spate of attacks against digital infrastructure during lockdown and increased opposition to some local planning applications for phone masts, spurred by harmful online conspiracy theories falsely claiming a link between 5G and the spread of coronavirus.

The ministers are also asking councils to appoint a 'digital champion' to work across multiple teams to ensure a cohesive digital infrastructure strategy and encouraging authorities to use central government's dedicated 'barrier busting' team which is charged with removing the obstacles to rollout.

Minister for Digital Infrastructure Matt Warman said:

"We want to help people get access to fast and reliable connectivity. It is a top priority for this government.

"Councils have a vital role to play in the rollout of digital infrastructure and while there is good work going on up and down the country, there is more we can do.

"Today I'm writing to local authorities with new guidance and advice to help them break down some of the barriers to rollout and give them the tools they need to quell quack theories about 5G."

Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government, Simon Clarke MP said:

“Councils play a critical role in delivering high-speed broadband and this new guidance will help them roll out this vital infrastructure more easily.

“I want councils up and down the country to ensure their communities benefit from faster internet connections and better connectivity.

“This will help to drive growth locally and is part of this Government’s mission to level up every area of our country and help local areas to recover after the pandemic.”

Cllr Mark Hawthorne, the Local Government Association’s digital connectivity spokesperson, said:

“Councils are uniquely placed within their communities to identify the needs of residents and businesses, including their demand for faster and more reliable digital connectivity.

“This new suite of guidance will complement the work councils are already doing, alongside central government and local partners to support the roll out of digital infrastructure across local areas. As we look forward, councils are committed to working closely with the Government to help deliver on its nationwide gigabit-broadband and mobile coverage ambitions.”

Hamish Macleod, Director at Mobile UK, said:

“The updated valuation guidance published by the Government will give councils the confidence to bring wider community benefits, such as enhanced mobile coverage, to their communities. From an industry perspective, it means adding public assets, often located in ideal locations for radio signal broadcast, into the mix to assist in the rapid rollout of world-class mobile connectivity.”

Telecoms companies need to secure rights to install their infrastructure on public sector land and buildings. But there are concerns some deals are not progressing quickly enough. This means homes, businesses and mobile customers are missing out on faster and more reliable internet connections.

While councils are obliged to get ‘best value’ when agreeing land access agreements, ministers expect them to take into account non-monetary benefits such as enhanced connectivity for residents to work from home and SMEs to trade online. The guidance also highlights recent legal interpretations of the current framework which indicate reductions in previous rents are to be expected.

The letter also emphasises the impact councillors and senior non-elected officials can have to drive forward strategies for getting better connectivity in local areas and encourage a more joined-up approach between highways, legal, estates and digital teams.

The ministers point to Cambridgeshire and Kent as excellent examples of local authorities working effectively to encourage next-generation gigabit broadband networks. The West Midlands 5G project, part of the Government's £200 million 5G Testbed and Trials programme, is cited as having successfully addressed some of the challenges councils face when deploying 5G technology.

The West Midlands also is one of the areas in the country with the highest available coverage of gigabit capable broadband. Others include Kingston Upon Hull, Dunbartonshire, Reading, Edinburgh, Southampton and Liverpool.

The plain English guide to 5G has been created to help councils answer questions and manage any concerns around the health implications of 5G. The guide explains what 5G is and what health experts say about it.

Philip Marnick, Spectrum Group Director at Ofcom, said:

"The UK has a great opportunity to be a world leader in 5G – making the most of the benefits this new technology offers people and businesses. So it's important that public bodies work together to address some of the myths and misinformation around 5G, and that decisions are based on sound evidence."

Public Health England says 5G should have 'no consequences to public health'. Ofcom has also been measuring the levels of electro-magnetic radiation emitted by 5G masts around the country, and in all cases has found the levels to be a small fraction of those allowed by international safety guidelines.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

- The land valuations [guidance](#) updates existing advice available to local authorities to reflect tribunal determinations on valuation that have been published since the 2017 reforms to the Electronic Communications Code came into effect.
- The guidance also clarifies how the public sector duty to obtain 'best value' applies when local authorities are granting access to their land and assets for telecoms deployment.
- The guidance also explains the different approaches that can be taken to the renewal of existing agreements. The Electronic Communications Code is the legislative framework underpinning these type of agreements. It was reformed in 2017 to make it cheaper for industry to deploy, install and maintain infrastructure. It is important public sector bodies are aware of court cases interpreting the new provisions, which demonstrate that reductions in previous rents are to be expected.
- The [plain English guide](#) to 5G explains the facts to help local politicians deal with queries from the public and to combat any misinformation that is spreading online. Concerns have been raised around 5G and how it could affect people's health. These are unfounded. This guidance will help dispel wrong information about 5G.