



**East of England**  
All Party Parliamentary Group

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## **BRIEFING ON LEVELLING UP DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY**

Widespread, fit-for-the-future digital connectivity is critical to the long-term social and economic success of the East of England. These benefits are well documented and the inclusion of digital infrastructure as a core mission in the Government's Levelling Up White Paper is a clear indicator of its importance.

The joint [APPG and EELGA Levelling Up the East of England report](#) noted that due to the rurality of the East of England, vast disparities exist in the quality and reliability of digital connectivity across the region, both fixed and mobile connectivity. For information the Levelling Up White Paper's targets – and the region's confidence about whether they will be met - are:

**a) By 2030, will the East of England have full gigabit-capable broadband?**

*Yes, probably. However, we would like to see a more ambitious delivery target from Government (medium to high confidence)*

**b) By 2030, will the East of England have full 4G coverage and 5G coverage for the majority of the population?**

*It will be very hard for government to achieve full 4G coverage if the issues around the shortfalls in the Shared Rural Network programme are not addressed (low confidence)*

EELGA have recently reported that progress is being made with Full Fibre availability up from 20% in 2021 to over 50% in 2023 and 77.2% of premises now having access to 5G mobile coverage. These increases in such a short period are due to a large influx of commercial investment to the region, however further action is needed to ensure all communities in the East of England benefit from this necessary new infrastructure.

### **Full Fibre rollout**

With digital connectivity underpinning so much of our modern economy and society, full fibre is one key to the region's future success. This gold standard digital infrastructure has the capacity to transform local communities, opening up job opportunities, as well as driving smarter, greener delivery of public services to tackle regional inequalities.

This essential infrastructure will only increase in importance over the next decade, and ensuring consumers, businesses and the public sector are able to access services, and understand the potential they bring, is vital.

In recent years, the East of England has benefitted from widespread commercial investment in new fibre broadband networks from a range of suppliers. A key driver of this expansion has been the shift to a competitive landscape for broadband rollout, boosting investment and ultimately giving consumers more choice.

For example, CityFibre has invested over £300m to connect hundreds of thousands of homes in towns and cities in the East including Cambridge, Lowestoft, Great Yarmouth, Southend-on-Sea and Bury St Edmunds.

The economic benefit of this network to the region was analysed in 2022 by consultancy Hatch, finding a business productivity benefit of £2bn plus a £430m benefit from a widened workforce over the next 15 years.

## **Rural connectivity**

As highlighted in the East of England APPG's Levelling up report, the rurality of the region means there is a risk in the availability of reliable digital infrastructure between urban and rural areas. These areas will not be viable for commercial investment and require targeted Government intervention.

The good news is that BDUK's Project Gigabit programme has recently awarded three contracts to CityFibre to bring fibre broadband to many hard to reach communities in [Cambridgeshire](#), [Norfolk and Suffolk](#). As three of the five first regional contracts, rural communities in the East are well placed to be some of the first in the country to benefit from the scheme.

Across those projects already awarded, over 187,000 rural homes and businesses will benefit from the combined £283m Government subsidy. In addition, CityFibre has committed £178m to additionally reach 458,000 premises, ensuring as many communities as possible can benefit.

Ensuring that all in the East of England are able to benefit from this new infrastructure is key. However, whilst the current procurement timeline includes Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire it does not include Essex.

The Gigabit Voucher Scheme has been cited as a good way to ensure that internet rollout is demand driven, and more funding could be allocated to this approach to support rural communities in the East of England.

## **Adoption and take up**

To ensure that the wide public and private benefits of this new infrastructure are fully realised across the East of England, it is important that consumers and businesses are well informed and supported to take advantage.

Consumer uncertainty, largely the result of existing broadband marketing practices, is currently slowing the rate of adoption of full fibre and leaving consumers frustrated, confused and misled about what products they are buying.

This uncertainty not only dampens the investment case, but also unnecessarily costs to consumers. Recent research has shown that across every basic broadband product level, it is cheaper to switch to fibre than remain on an outdated copper connection.

The Government should consider implementing an information campaign, particularly in those areas where subsidy will deliver connections to alert communities to the opportunities made available to them.

EELGA have suggested there is a potentially larger role for local authorities in this agenda for example to coordinate advocacy in the East of England around digital infrastructure funding and, where possible, devolution.

In addition, further work must be done to align and standardise terminology of fibre and broadband products to remove confusion and empower consumers.

## **Mobile Connectivity**

The Government's current target is to ensure 5G connectivity for "all populated areas" and nationwide 4G coverage by 2030. According to the Connected Nations Update, using data from January 2023, the England average for premises with outdoor 4G coverage was close to 100%, and the East of England was in line with this average.

However, this connection will not necessarily be of high quality or available to all customers. For example, over just over 600,000 premises in the East of England do not have access to 4G from all providers that's strong enough to be used inside, while 25,000 homes don't have access to any 4G at all that's strong enough to be used indoors.

With regards to 5G, the technology is still being rolled out, with a wide divergence between local authorities. For example, only 16.6% of North Norfolk premises had access to a 5G connection outside their premises from at least one provider, while 100% of premises in Watford, Harlow and Hertsmere are covered by at least one provider. In total, 77.2% of premises in the East of England have high confidence of 5G access outside from at least one provider, lower than the 82% coverage for the rest of the country.

As older technologies such as 3G and the PSTN (public switched telephone network) copper phone network are phased out, a coordinated effort from Government, industry, regulators and local authorities is needed to ensure that all are prepared and informed effectively.

## The East of England's digital "asks"

More can be done by businesses, Government and the regulator to ensure that consumers are not missing out and investment continues to flow into better digital connectivity across the region. Some examples of this could include:

- Accelerating the national Gigabit procurement programme and including Essex at the earliest opportunity
- Exploration of new locally driven funding mechanisms under Project Gigabit including "The Fund" to deliver connectivity to areas not currently in scope
- Consideration of the potential for local government to have a greater role in ensuring digital connectivity especially in hard to reach areas.
- A Government-led information campaign to educate consumers about next-generation technologies, the impacts they could have on their lives and businesses, and to support them to switch on to such services.
- Introduction of clear and consistent terminology around the advertising of broadband products to allow people to make informed decisions about their connections.
- The Government to work with the provider-led Shared Rural Network programme and local government to identify areas outside of the original scope and which have now been identified as in need of intervention.

The East of England APPG is kindly supported by British Sugar, London Stansted Airport, the East of England LGA, AstraZeneca, Anglian Water, Cadent, Transport East, the UK Innovation Corridor, Freeport East, England's Economic Heartland, CityFibre and BuildEast.



The academic partners of the East of England APPG are the Centre for Public and Policy Engagement at the University of Essex, The University of Cambridge, Anglia Ruskin University and the University of East Anglia.

