

## RSN Seminar: Rural Digital Connectivity

**Date:** 25<sup>th</sup> May 2022  
**Subject:** Rural Digital Connectivity  
**Chair:** [Kerry Booth](#), Deputy Chief Executive, Rural Services Network  
**Host:** Online Event via Zoom

### Speakers

**Speaker 1: Tom Denman**, Digital Innovation, Security and Behavioural Insights Adviser, [Local Government Association](#)

**Speaker 2: Gemma Bristow**, Digital Connectivity Specialist, [South Hams](#) and [West Devon Borough Council](#)

**Speaker 3: Gareth Elliott**, Director of Policy and Communications, [Mobile UK](#)

**Speaker 4: Mark Trafford**, Head of Sales, [Airband](#)

### Key Learning Points

#### LGA Cyber, Digital Technology Programme Connectivity Support

- LGA is a politically led, cross-party organisation that works on behalf of councils to ensure local government has a strong, credible voice with national government
- Worked on a programme re digital connectivity and the LGA provided grant funding to six councils to look at some innovative pilots meeting the general challenges that councillors have with mobile and broadband connectivity.
- [Superfast Essex project](#) promoting full fibre to residents that had not engaged or were struggling get on board with a bespoke postcode level marketing campaign, through social media, in person, newsletters and through digital champion networks that they had established. Also produced a [Digital Champions toolkit](#).
- [Westminster Digital Connectivity Toolkit](#) – a step by step guide about how you would go about mapping not-spots within a certain area, looking at how you would engage with residents, and behavioural insights/behaviour change project done as part of this.
- [Royal Borough of Greenwich](#): Smart City Strategy.
- Durham County Council and Nottingham County Council are both doing projects on digital connectivity mapping. Using higher education partners to develop sensors to map 4G and 5G signal strength in rural areas as well as urban centres. Hoping to get a good steer on where the not-spots are and the different strengths of signal. Plus getting an updated view on the mobile connectivity landscape and address what providers have promised to provide etc.
- [Dorset Council feasibility study into fibre engineer training](#): national shortage of fibre engineers to roll out connectivity in rural areas. Working with partners to provide a pilot training programme to train, recruit and retain engineers and work to overcome barriers to rural connectivity.
- [LGA Digital Pathfinders Programme](#)

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## Should all councils have a digital connectivity champion?

- Gemma in a role that is part-funded by the LGA. Works cross two rural, separate councils that have combined services. Councils have been building support for a digital champion.
- [Connecting Devon and Somerset](#) is the public organisation responsible for public funding improving digital connectivity and has a very large geographic remit.
- Most of South Hams covered by Airband, pockets of West Devon have fibre network mainly around the periphery of Dartmoor area; so Dartmoor is largely devoid of fibre plans at present.
- Using a number of fixed wireless companies to provide bespoke solutions for small pockets of houses either outside existing fibre roll-out or those that need better connectivity before the fibre is going to reach them.
- Issues with NDAs means that Gemma doesn't have access to certain data held by Connecting Devon and Somerset. However, has used [Connected Nations report data from Ofcom, Think Broadband](#) and the Westminster Digital Connectivity Toolkit to get data.
- Been building relationships with the local body and working with suppliers who have shared their data directly. Where they have been expanding this has been critical in putting them in touch with communities desperate for better broadband.
- Also working with suppliers to help support new infrastructure e.g., telegraph poles which can be controversial so assisting with local planning authorities.
- Built an [on-line model](#) to assist the public with the various options available to them.
- Recruiting [Community Broadband Champions](#): Team of 150 and they build a database each of people looking for better broadband, who are outside of any commercial roll-out plans, and who are eligible for Gigabit vouchers. Identifying viable clusters that can be supported through community led fibre projects.
- Gemma's background is as a planner so aware of the constraints on Planning Officers. Hopes to apply pressure to developers to consider digital connectivity at the outset for small and medium sized sites.
- Mapping is invaluable for residents to understand what is happening on a geographic system.
- [Project Gigabit](#): DCMS will hold the latest data set on coverage.

## Rural Mobile Connectivity & The Case for Digital Champions

- Mobile UK is the trade body for the four main mobile operators: Three, EE, Vodafone and O2.
- Extend 4G coverage to 95% of UK land mass by at least one operator, through the [Shared Rural Network](#), which will be completed by 2024 for partial not-spots. The Total not-spot areas to be completed by 2027.
- Building up 5G networks primarily in urban areas – issue of capacity in urban whereas coverage is issue in rural areas.

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- [Digital Champions](#) where these are in place with Councils it has accelerated both fixed and mobile. Lot of work to do on awareness, how mobile works, masts etc. Helps to get the infrastructure in place – without the infrastructure there is no signal. They need to be a senior role to talk across the organisation and engage with the political side. Need to see leadership from the Council.
- [Cluttons](#) partnered with YouGov to survey councillors about the Government's gigabit rollout plans and the challenges involved in meeting the national targets. In addition, they surveyed businesses and consumers to gain insight into the level of understanding around gigabit capable technology and awareness of the benefits that gigabit connections can bring.
- Delays to rollout of 5G to the economy is as high as £41Bn.
- Misinformation regarding [5G and health](#) - cannot distribute mobile, biological matter through mobile signals. People have legitimate questions with any new technology and it's important to provide them with answers.
- Over 70% of councils do not have a digital role/champion in place.
- A number of very good schemes out there already with some Councils and include Glasgow has a telecoms unit in place – wayleaves, standardised documentation etc. West Midlands has some of the highest approval ratings – work closely with planning department and industry. Wolverhampton has both a political and an officer level digital champion.
- Digital champion needs to be a role where people have a rudimentary understanding of the industry and the technology, and equally, the experience of how to engage with others. And finally, it needs to be outcome, not output focused, the outcome is getting that digital connectivity.

## **Levelling Up Broadband: Future Proofing Rural Communities**

- Airband works in different areas i.e., fibre and contracts with Council that take priority, demand led projects from community champions.
- Have fixed wireless solutions and working in West Midland, Devon, Somerset, Shropshire and Wales. Branching out to Cheshire and Oxfordshire with Fibre to the Premises Network. 4G solutions becoming more popular, there are issues with capacity but is a preferred solution if struggling to get any connectivity.
- VOIP solutions will be offered in the future.
- Working closely with [BDUK](#).
- Becoming specialists in 4G roll-out and putting in small fibre builds from their wireless backhaul.
- Challenges include high demand for experienced engineers particularly across Devon slowing progress, people not wanting masts near them but wanting connectivity.
- Champion the cause of communities delivering solutions that work for everybody. Where there is a local community ambassador then those builds tend to go ahead a lot more smoothly and with better community liaison.
- Working closely with [Community Foundation in Shropshire](#) and happy to sponsor projects that spread connectivity in rural areas.

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- [Public Switched Telephone Network \(PTSN\)](#) from analogue to a fully digital network in 2025. Noticing that in some areas, if there are faults on the line, repair work isn't being completed and the copper line is being switched off completely. In some towns, the BT exchange has been shut down earlier than 2025.
- Issues with accessing elderly in rural communities and education around digitalisation and connectivity.

## Open Forum Discussion

- **Mark Trafford, Airband's response in relation to not-spots:** Happy to look at not-spot situations. Depends if there are fibre networks nearby, have a number of masts in Devon also. If there is a local champion that says there is a community in need of connectivity, then Airband can look at options including line-of-sight of current masts, different options of funding or if commercially viable to Airband they will pay to have installed.
- **Gareth Elliott, Mobile UK's response in relation to increasing coverage in a district council area:** Gareth noted that as the planning authority, then it was important to engage with the planners, provide them with a database on questions re health, why the mast needs to be where it does, 5G check the facts etc, set up an assets list e.g., recycling/refuse centre. Sets up a co-ordinated understanding across the whole council. Also, key is building relationships with the industry and getting the right contacts and context in how they operate, having positive conversations with planning department, standardised documentation etc, making the process simple to apply.
- **Gareth Elliott, Mobile UK's response re signal deterioration as more people connect to a particular mast and the signal becomes weaker:** Existing network is constantly being upgraded and reform of the spectrums use. Particularly the 700-megahertz spectrum for rural areas and which has been earmarked for 5G – a longer wavelength to cover longer areas. Airband commented that they would like to be involved in that.
- **Gareth Elliott, Mobile UK's response re Shared Rural Network in Nottinghamshire:** Timelines affected by the pandemic, but a lot of work completed on the planning elements. Issues, post Brexit, with state aid and public funding etc - a new regime now in place. Pre-applications have been going in, starting to see some successful permissions coming through and the infrastructure put in place.
- **Gareth Elliott, Mobile UK's response re Emergency Services Network (ESN):** ESN is an EE project (not all four operators), and an example where planning difficulties change the operational side of things. Meant to be a mast that all four operators could potentially share but the original mast size was reduced by the planning department to the point where it could only be an ESN mast and not have the commercial aspect that was needed or the capacity. Planning rules now allow more sharing of infrastructure, heights have been increased in protected and non-protected areas and should hopefully have a very positive effect from now on.

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- **Mark Trafford, Airband's response in relation to Gemma's comment on use of "switch-off by 2025" and Chris Taylor's comments on vulnerable residents:** agreed that better terminology could be used and happy to work with Gemma on phrasing this. From his research with BT, Mark understands that BT will be leaving some copper service on, but it will be very limited and they're still hoping that the line will run over fibre. Agreed with Chris that there is a responsibility to ensure the elderly understand and know there are solutions.
- **Graham Biggs, Rural Services Network (RSN) response re capacity of the electricity network:** RSN has recently written a letter to BEIS on the subject of properties off-grid gas networks and concern re the capacity of the electricity network to manage. Government response noted that a review has been commissioned from the electricity sector in response to the recent winter storms with the aim of identifying lessons and actions to be taken forward – no timescales and no costings set. The RSN is the secretariat for the [APPG for Rural Services](#) and raised this issue 12-15 months previously to Ministers. Opportunity, via the APPG, to take this back to MPs, rather than as individual LAs, and "lobby" MPs with the sort of information that Chris Taylor's group has. We need MPs and policy makers to understand what the consequences of PSTN could be e.g., "No electricity, no router, no VOIP" and what happens and in what order. Please provide us with examples that we can take to our APPG.
- **Gareth Elliott, Mobile UK's response re resilience in the electricity network:** Wanted to reassure everyone that the vast majority of sites have battery backup in the first instance and that those that are critical network infrastructure will have decent generators. These are all time limited, and the ultimate reliance is on the Grid so there is work ongoing about more independent sources of energy e.g., solar/wind power. As an industry engaging on this matter with trade bodies including Energy Networks Association and the government.

## Any Other Key Outcomes from the Seminar

**[RSN's Revitalising Rural Campaign](#) Specific Policy Asks** of the Government is for fairer distribution of national resources to rural areas and more nuanced national policies. The campaign consists of 14 Chapters, including a Chapter on [Rural Digital Connectivity](#).

As new Government strategies are announced, RSN puts them through a "[Rural Lens Review](#)" which adds depth and texture to the Policy Asks. A fresh crosscut of the Revitalising document being worked on will look in more depth at younger people. It will also look at the impact of various issues on younger people and develop case studies (personal experiences) rather than dry policy discussions. Reviews include: [Levelling Up White Paper](#) (see Pg11 on Rural Digital Connectivity).

**[Case Studies](#):** If you've got a great case study highlighting some of the issues within the seminar, or where a project has been successful, we'd love for you to share them with us. Please complete the downloadable form in the link and email it through to

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us to help inform our Revitalising Rural Campaign but to also highlight to Government the impact of policy decision making.

**Who are the Rural Services Network?** [Please click here to find out.](#)

## Useful links to share

- **Digital Mobile Spectrum Ltd**, provide reporting and tracking information for the four Mobile Network Operators, DCMS and Ofcom. They also lead on all external communications and stakeholder engagement. Find out more at: <https://rsnonline.org.uk/rsp-member-digital-mobile-spectrum-limited>
- [High Street Digital Health Hubs](#) e.g., 65 High Street, Nailsea. To find out more contact Dr Malcolm Rigler: [m.rigler@nhs.net](mailto:m.rigler@nhs.net).
- Government's Levelling up white paper notes that being physically and digitally connected will ensure that cities, towns and communities thrive, which intimates that if we're not connected in rural areas, we won't be able to thrive.
- Shropshire Council Briefing note on Digital Connectivity Challenges

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