Connectivity is promoting citizens' digital inclusion

- Smartphones are now the most popular devices for accessing online content.

- Digital exclusion is linked to a range of social and health problems, costing services dearly.

- Policy-makers can take action – often without resource implications – to improve local mobile connectivity.

Digital exclusion occurs when individuals cannot access digital services, communications and the Internet – perhaps due to cost, unavailability, or digital illiteracy. Tackling digital exclusion is a stated priority of the UK government. Working with government to tackle this problem provides an opportunity for innovative councils to proactively lead on this important issue and demonstrate coordination with government through the Government Digital Inclusion Strategy.

Poor connectivity is a contributing factor to digital exclusion, and there is evidence that remote and economically deprived areas are more prone to poor mobile reception. Improving access to the mobile network is a tangible, measurable way for councils to improve the lives of their residents.

The Royal Geographical Society's 2016 report, Tackling the Digital Divide, found that mobile connectivity was one the most important factors affecting digital exclusion in rural areas. The report considered ways that socially isolated individuals are at risk of a range of health and social problems which cost council services significantly – for example, inability to interact with the NHS Patient Access platform makes medical appointments and prescription renewals much harder, resulting in poorer health outcomes.

Digital exclusion is also a generational issue; according to Age UK, over two thirds of all digital exclusion is among those aged over 65 years. In 2015, Vodafone and the Good Things Foundation ran a project to determine the place of mobile internet access for digital inclusion. They found

that personal mobile access not only enormously accelerated participants' learning, it was vital to overcome feelings of isolation, loneliness and boredom.

Mobile connectivity is perhaps the most important factor in digital inclusion. A 2015 Ofcom report showed that smartphones have replaced other computers as the most popular device for accessing online content. The report stated that the availability of 4G mobile broadband was a key driver of this change, and in some cases is the only form of Internet access some individuals will have. Some 37 million adults in the UK have a smartphone, and on average smartphone owners spend two hours online on their phone, which is double the amount spent on laptops or PCs.

Time UK Adults Spend Online

Source: Ofcom
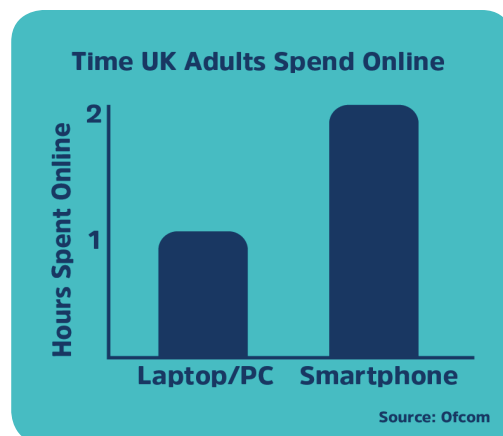
The UK government has recognised the link between mobile connectivity and its digital inclusion agenda. Complementing the extensive investments that the mobile network operators have made since the introduction of 4G technology – amounting to £2bn every year – the 2010-15 Coalition government invested £150m to improve the quality and coverage of mobile phone voice and data services, and the 2016 Autumn Statement announced over £1bn for mobile and internet upgrades. The May 2017 Conservative general election manifesto meanwhile includes a promise of £740m for digital infrastructure investment.

But central spending alone cannot solve the UK's mobile challenges. Local action is needed, which is why Mobile Britain has launched its new Building Mobile Britain campaign to get local authorities, mobile network operators, central government and other players working together to take action.

Local authorities can greatly improve their local connectivity and drive local economic growth by:

- Improving access to public assets for mobile providers
- Abolishing planning controls for small equipment installations
- Requesting that developers and planners consider mobile connectivity at the beginning of a project
- Explicitly supporting the Mobile UK campaign, Building Mobile Britain, including in local development plans
- Partnering with mobile providers to trial new methods of extending mobile coverage
- Promoting the use of mobile-friendly materials in construction projects and creating local digital or connectivity champions.

Mobile UK is the trade association for the UK's mobile network operators – EE, O2, Three and Vodafone.

For further information please contact Gareth Elliott, Head of Policy and Communications, at ge@mobileuk.org