

# **Delivering Digital Britain: ISPA's roadmap for the next Government**

**Internet Services Providers' Association 2024**

In today's interconnected world, internet access is a fundamental pillar of social and economic inclusion in the UK, with connectivity providing access to education, healthcare, employment, and essential services. This need is only growing with AI, quantum computing and the data centres that power new innovations requiring better, faster, and more widespread connection.

These developments have been made possible by the rapid expansion of fixed, mobile and wireless connectivity infrastructure. A veritable UK success story, driven by £35bn of private investment from a range of new and established infrastructure operators, and boosted by government investment via Project Gigabit. Rollout is continuing to transform lives and communities across the country, upgrading everyone to future-proofed, reliable connectivity that will power the UK for decades to come.

However, the job is not finished – the next government must recommit to supporting commercial investments that are bringing about this change, as well as to prioritise upgrading the final third of the UK, and make the most of the opportunities this presents.

ISPA welcomes the pledge from the UK's largest political parties to continue investing in Project Gigabit and the gigabit voucher scheme, which have been instrumental in expanding connectivity across the UK, particularly in hard-to-reach communities.

At the same time, we believe that the next Government has the responsibility to capitalise on the growth potential of digitisation, implement new policies which enable the sector to complete its work, and continue to promote and protect competition, bringing a multitude of benefits for consumers.

## **Quick wins:**

### **1. Recognise telecoms infrastructure rollout as a cross-governmental priority.**

Fixed, mobile and wireless connectivity rollout is strategically important to digitisation and long-term economic growth, yet too often progress is impeded by a lack of coordination between Government departments, with misaligned priorities across DSIT, DfT and DLUHC.

The next Government must integrate fixed and mobile rollout into cross-governmental policy by developing a clear and ambitious overarching strategy for the sector that brings together network build, skills, investment, take up, regulation and services, led by a suitably senior digital minister within DSIT, with a key focus on policy development and rapid delivery.

### **2. Provide an immediate speed boost to rollout by fully embracing flexi permits and cancelling plans for street works charging.**

Streetworks remain a key barrier to fixed and mobile connectivity rollout. Despite being widely supported by the sector, flexi permits – designated areas rather than individual roads can be combined into one permit for streetworks – have so far only been rolled out on a limited trial basis. Initial trials have shown the huge potential for reducing administrative burdens and disruption for communities.

The implementation of flexi permits would see considerably faster rollout with less disruption for local residents, and substantial carbon saving in the deployment of gigabit broadband. Government should urgently adopt this ready-made solution by moving to national trials or full adoption, alongside cancelling plans to progress the Fines and Lane Rental Surplus Funds consultation, which will only impede efforts to connect the final 30%.

### **3. Commit to ensuring an efficient and proven infrastructure planning framework.**

Around one third of the UK still needs to be upgraded, mostly in harder to connect areas where government funding will play a bigger role. The new Government should commit to a supportive planning framework that makes rollout faster and more efficient, removing rather than adding barriers.

This includes extending permitted development rights for all broadband infrastructure, including containerised exchanges. These, along with cabinets and poles, are all crucial building blocks of the success of fibre rollout in the UK. The sector has formed a working group to address localised public concerns in relation to the siting of new infrastructure, but it

is vital that existing permitted developments rights are strengthened and maintained in order to ensure that public and private funded rollout can continue at pace.

In addition, the government should use the breathing room offered by the election and consult with all relevant sectors before reintroducing plans to put the National Underground Asset Register (NUAR) on a statutory footing to ensure that NUAR is fit for purpose, proportionate and can fully deliver on expectations.

The sector also needs urgent confirmation from the government that regulations surrounding telegraph pole coating in England and Wales are aligned with Northern Ireland and the European Union, in order to provide greater supply chain certainty for the sector's suppliers operating across all three areas.

## **Long term priorities:**

### **1. Support the sector via a growth-enabling and competitive regulatory environment.**

Telecoms is fundamentally distinctive from other utilities – such as water and energy – for its high level of private investment, competitive market, and technological innovation. This environment consistently delivers choice and world-leading low prices for consumers, with a unit value that has increased drastically over time.

These factors need to be reflected in a regulatory approach to consumer and market interventions tailored to a diverse and competitive market that focuses on supporting growth in the telecoms sector. The regulator needs to take a proactive approach in considering where intervention is necessary to prevent harm, and to allow new measures sufficient time to bed-in.

In addition, the regulator should take a holistic approach when it comes to decision making in terms of telecoms – considering all aspects of the telecoms market and the various types of companies. A blanket approach to regulation is not appropriate in the telecoms sector, which benefits from choice, differentiation and innovation that drive outcomes for consumers.

Moreover, Ofcom should ensure a steady, fair and sustainable competitive landscape. The government and regulator should also recognise that the sector is the backbone of growth for the wider economy and is doing significant work to provide value for consumers – for example, the voluntary rollout of social tariffs and a wide range of local, regional and national inclusion initiatives – and enable access to digital opportunities, which should be kept in mind when designing future regulation.

### **2. Facilitate infrastructure rollout by expanding public-private partnerships.**

The next government has the opportunity to take the UK from two-thirds full fibre coverage to near universal coverage – providing ubiquitous, reliable, fast connectivity to power our economy and society. As of April 2024, there are now 31 local and regional Project Gigabit contracts in place, delivering over 780,000 connections to hard-to-reach communities which would otherwise miss out<sup>1</sup>.

Policymakers can help by recommitting to Project Gigabit and continuing to fund these partnerships. Further, there should be consideration as to how additional funding programmes can support in reaching the final 100,000 very hard to reach premises. In

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<sup>1</sup> [Project Gigabit progress update – April 2024](#)

addition, learnings and collaboration could be utilised in developing future projects, such as in addressing digital inclusion.

Local authorities also play a key role in facilitating the deployment of infrastructure, but support and engagement from local authorities could be more consistent. There is a clear role to encourage local authority best practice in enabling and facilitating digital infrastructure rollout and cooperation.

### **3. Launch a cross-society information campaign on skills and the importance of digital take-up.**

Despite the widespread adoption of digital services across society, some individuals and households lack the necessary skills or remain unable to access these services, hindering productivity, social mobility, and innovation in care, education, TV distribution, and security, all at a time of big technological change – including the switch off of the traditional telephone network, 2G and 3G networks.

Those unable to make the most of the opportunities presented by digital could face significant disadvantages. In addition, the amount of data used overall is only increasing, necessitating stronger, faster internet connections, particularly with the advent of new technologies such as artificial intelligence. Gigabit capable connectivity, which can cope with this demand, is being rolled out to power the UK, yet it has some way to go and suffers from a lack of public awareness.

Therefore, we are calling on the Government to launch a whole-of-society campaign as part of a wider digital skills strategy to engage people on the importance of digital connectivity and take-up, encompassing skills and the socioeconomic benefits of gigabit, as well as encouraging businesses to invest in digitisation to better serve local communities. This campaign should actively involve local government and civil society organisations, directed by clear strategic direction from the central government, recognising the clear social and economic value that can be built by maximising digital opportunity.

### **4. Adopt a holistic approach to resilience within CNI security strategies.**

The resilience of the UK's critical national infrastructure (CNI) can only be guaranteed by adopting a holistic approach which aligns and coordinates efforts between the core CNI sectors, rather than the current approach of implementing isolated, disjointed solutions.

Specifically, with the electricity network supplying the foundation for the telecoms sector – and the wider UK economy – action should be taken to improve the core resilience of the grid, rather than retrofitting back-up capacity across other parts of the UK’s CNI.

All sectors will need to play their part in improving their physical and cybersecurity resilience, but interdependencies and cascading risks need to be recognised and action needs to be focused on where it is most effective and efficient.

### **5. Recognise that online safety is a shared responsibility.**

ISPs have played a fundamental role in making the UK one of the safest places to be online, with actions such as blocking access to child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) content, and enabling parental controls. However, local internet service providers are no longer the only gatekeepers to the internet – instead, this role is shared amongst a broad range of services, from operating systems, to VPNs and DNS providers.

Any further intervention to block or filter online content needs to address the full value chain to be effective, or alternatively place a greater focus on content removal and individual device controls. The next government must be aware of this complex landscape in order to properly support Ofcom in creating online safety guidance.

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## **About ISPA**

*The Internet Services Providers' Association (ISPA UK) is the UK's trade association for providers of internet services, working to promote collaboration and constructive dialogue between our members and the wider internet community.*