

6 Point Connectivity Blueprint Proposal for Policy Reform

MAY 2024



The leading digital infrastructure provider for the United Kingdom

Cornerstone's strategic framework for policy reform addresses the key challenges and seeks to accelerate progress towards a digitally enabled society.

The '6 Point Connectivity Blueprint' provides a comprehensive approach, including targeted policies and actions in six crucial areas. It includes enhanced funding proposals for local planning authorities, streamlined legislative changes, and empowerment of Digital Champions.

Its purpose is designed to support the Government in driving economic growth and closing the digital divide across the United Kingdom. It will bring efficiency, innovation and inclusive development, and unlock the full potential of digital connectivity. Cornerstone is committed to being the Government and industry's trusted partner in paving the way for enhanced digital infrastructure, that supports economic growth, social inclusion, and technological advancement.

1. Planning for Prosperity - enhanced funding and resource support for local planning authorities

Cornerstone has relationships with over 400 local planning authorities across the UK and we have seen an increasing trend that these organisations do not have the resources to review and advance telecommunications infrastructure planning applications.

This requires increased funding and resources for local planning authorities to efficiently handle a high volume of applications. Implementing Planning Performance Agreements (“PPAs”) is one way the telecommunications industry can invest in resolving resource shortfalls in areas where planning applications for our work is concentrated. This is aligned with the Government’s code of practice in terms of early and pre-application engagement which we know drives positive, engaged outcomes.

In addition, we propose that a revised dimensioning of the local planning authority resourcing (against a forecast volume of planning applications) is urgently needed to ensure minimum viable resourcing is in place to allow inward investment in a controlled and sustainable manner.

2. Digital Integration Mandate - mandate for local authorities to incorporate digital connectivity plans in redevelopment processes

Our recommendation for implementation is that a mandate is to be given to local planning authorities to incorporate digital connectivity plans in “Section 106” agreements, assessing their impact to ensure comprehensive and forward-looking telecommunications infrastructure is properly catered for in any new development. Although authorities today occasionally use their statutory convening powers to support collaboration between developers and telecommunication infrastructure providers, the responsibility of providing digital infrastructure is not felt by the developer. This leads to the need to provide connectivity solutions late into the planning process or even well after the development completes.

A requirement that the developer must work with the telecommunications industry at the outset could be included, to ensure that their development is appropriately serviced to allow digital infrastructure to be provided in the future. In the case of removal of existing telecommunications infrastructure, if someone wants to redevelop a building with an existing telecommunications presence, the local authority should require that the developer attempt to accommodate the infrastructure into a new and viable location consensually.

Aside from Section 106 agreements, a policy which required local planning authorities to include telecommunications infrastructure in their master plans would also remove considerable adversity currently experienced in the planning process.

3. Local Digital Champions - empowerment, support and funding for Digital Champions in local authorities

We support increased government resources and funding for Digital Champions within local authorities, recognising their pivotal role in facilitating the rollout of telecommunications infrastructure. For local planning authorities to be able to accept inward investment like Cornerstone's in digital infrastructure, it is an absolute requirement for each local planning authority to have i) a digital strategy, ii) empowered staff to execute it with reach to cabinet/ executive level, and iii) funding covering those involved in operational rollout requirements.

One of the issues Cornerstone encounters is that there is no standard or agreed remit for existing Digital Champions. It would therefore help if their terms of reference were much clearer, especially regarding supporting rollouts. Cornerstone see the main role of Digital Champions as joining up the areas within council departments that are needed to support telecommunications infrastructure i.e. planning, highways, estates, economic development, elected representatives and that our most valuable interactions with local authorities are when we recognise that all those disciplines have a supportive function.

For example, during a rollout, we greatly appreciate highways working with us on opening notices and approving traffic management for the build, estates teams working with us to use their assets, and economic development stakeholder engagement, ensuring improved connectivity aligned to economic development strategies. Our observation of the current situation is that many planning, estates, highways departments, and elected representatives, are not aligned with their own council's published digital and/or economic development strategy that relies on inward investment from the telecommunications sector.

This highlights the key requirement for a Digital Champion to achieve an internal understanding of the local benefits of mobile connectivity and the need for infrastructure to enable these benefits. We have also observed that many Digital Champions appointments are not at a sufficiently high standing within the council to be able to communicate and influence – we see this as an important part of the remit to represent our sector effectively.

4. Unified Planning Framework - streamlining planning regimes between central and devolved Governments

The planning regime across central and devolved governments requires updating and standardising to drive greater consistency and clarity and streamline the planning process for infrastructure development. Cornerstone recommend that a change of National Planning Policy Framework ("NPPF") and/ or the devolved nation version of NPPF is brought about at the next available opportunity, to be as supportive as it needs to be to drive telecommunications rollout. We have observed that NPPF has been updated in recent years but without changes to the telecommunications section.

4G and 5G mobile services rollout, are national goals to support economic development and productivity gains, and they require the enablement of telecommunications infrastructure. It therefore seems unequal treatment for our sector not to be addressed when compared to other critical services such as energy and housing, where connectivity underpins those sectors. We see a place for a clear national policy that allows planners to put appropriate weight on the benefits of connectivity, as well as associated codes of practice being kept up to date.

Cornerstone recognises that permitted development legislation has been updated in prior years but it is our observation that by including further telecommunications infrastructure within the permitted development legislation, telecommunications rollout would be promoted and local planning authority resources would be freed up, allowing them to focus on delivering other objectives of economic and wider development such as housing provision, and delivery of renewable energy infrastructure.

5. Digital Access Act - legislative changes enabling multi-skilled visits enforcing the Electronic Communications Code (“the Code”)

We propose legislative changes to facilitate MSVs. Paragraph 26 of the Code gives the telecommunications operators statutory rights to access to conduct MSVs. If consensual agreement cannot be reached then the telecommunication operator can apply to the Tribunal for access. Unfortunately, applications to the Tribunal have resulted in excessive costs and delays in the rollout of this critical infrastructure which is not aligned with the intention of the Code. Telecommunications operators always seek to agree terms for a consensual access agreement whenever possible however, streamlining the process and making changes that align with the powers granted to other critical infrastructure providers (e.g. electricity/water) will provide clarity for all parties and speed up deployment.

6. PSTI Implementation Act - implementing the provisions of the PSTI Act for digital infrastructure advancement

We would welcome the implementation of the final provisions of the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Act (PSTI) to demonstrate continued government support for the sector. This will ensure a consistent valuation mechanism for operator-landowner agreements, reducing costs and delays as well as encouraging long term investment. The unimplemented changes in the Act will also deliver a single venue as the starting point for all claims concerning the renewal of these agreements.

Jurisdiction is currently split between the County Court and the Lands Tribunal which can lead to differential approaches that are unhelpful to ensuring consistency in the industry.

About Cornerstone

Our purpose is to design, build and deploy industry leading shared digital infrastructure in a sustainable way. We enable people and things, across the UK, to provide seamless mobile and digital connectivity by bringing together land, property, infrastructure, and technology for positive change.

Today we responsibly and safely maintain the largest mobile digital land estate of over 15,500 sites, giving us the experience and know-how to run and manage the physical backbone of our communications infrastructure. We recognise that the need to connect is ever growing and our proposal for policy reform offers substantial benefits to both Government and industry stakeholders. By supporting enhanced funding and resources to local planning authorities, Government and enterprise can expedite infrastructure development while promoting economic growth and job creation.

Managing digital infrastructure plans in the redevelopment processes ensures future proofing urban development, benefitting residents and local communities, and attracting international investment. Our experience shows that empowering Digital Champions drives sustainable development goals and increases innovation as evidenced by recent smart-city developments.

Streamlining the planning regimes between central and devolved Governments will promote regulatory coherence and reduce cost and administrative burdens.

Legislative changes, enabling multi-skilled visits, will enforce the Electronic Communications Code more efficiently and enable us to expand connectivity provision for all we serve.

Fully implementing on the provisions of the PSTI Act, will enable us to advance on our commitments to digital infrastructure and ultimately enhance our national competitive advantage. We wish to be the Government's partner in digital infrastructure transformation, to promote economic growth, critical enablement, and most importantly citizen welfare.

