

Written evidence submitted by Hertfordshire County Council

Hertfordshire County Council would like to confirm that the concerns of the Public Accounts Committee (listed below) broadly align with our own.

We remain committed to ensuring we successfully build upon the foundation of the Hertfordshire Superfast rollout and remain in a strong position to champion residents and businesses in the hardest to reach areas of the county.

The reduction in scope from *Full Fibre* to *Gigabit Capable* remains a concern as this is potentially a less future proof solution, so there is a risk of needing to revisit areas without Full Fibre, symmetrical connectivity after the programme is complete.

The Superfast programme has been able to deliver improved connectivity to a number of rural areas and has made more than 50,000 connections available to residents in businesses, the absence of which would have drastically impacted the ability to work from home during the last two years, but there is scope to do much more.

There is a summary of our position on each of these areas below:

- **failure to make meaningful progress to tackle the barriers faced by operators in maximising gigabit connectivity by 2025,**

The 'Barrier Busting' approach of DCMS has been a positive development, however, although there is an improved legislative landscape these powers could need to be strengthened further, particularly regarding wayleaves.

Equally, as mentioned in the report, it is not clear that the new 'State Aid' arrangements do enough to streamline the procurement process enough to be confident of meeting new delivery dates.

- **failure to demonstrate it has learnt lessons from the superfast programme for the detailed design of the gigabit programme,**

The decision to totally centralise the project and contract management of Project Gigabit, given the successful delivery and contract management of the Superfast programme, has raised some concerns and risks not fully utilising the skills and knowledge in the local programmes.

It also reduces Local Body opportunities to champion residents most in need of gigabit capable speeds and ensure that suppliers are delivering in

the correct areas, so there is a concern that those hardest to reach customers who missed out on Superfast are again at high risk of missing out on Full Fibre speeds.

There needs to be a clear strategy for reaching these premises and at this stage there is concern that there is a risk that many of the 'Final 1%' will fall outside the scope of the programme.

- **failure to demonstrate how its centralised procurement model will retain the people, skills and knowledge in local authorities that were critical to success in the superfast programme,**

There is a very high risk of skilled and experienced Project Teams being redeployed to other projects and that inexperienced officers will require substantial retraining. We have already seen some officers move on to other areas.

We fully support the LGA goal of a central fund for this as the risk of losing the skills and industry knowledge developed running the Superfast programme is substantial.

Local Bodies have clear oversight of the local issues and managing local delivery and it is essential everything is done to ensure these skills are not lost.

- **failure to give any reassurance that local authorities will get additional funding to retain their expert resources at a time when local government finances are under severe pressure from the pandemic,**

Hertfordshire County Council agree that this is a major concern. Revenue funding has been raised repeatedly as an issue and a concern since at least late 2019, and although DCMS have produced a RACI outlining the expectations of Local Bodies, no funding has been made available.

Hertfordshire County Council is reviewing the funding options for supporting this programme, but this is yet to be finalised and given other financial pressures represents a challenge in the current environment.

- **failure to make any meaningful progress in delivering the policy and legislative changes deemed essential by industry to achieve rapid roll-out,**

Hertfordshire County Council have been not been closely consulted in the new contractual arrangements. The contractual arrangements under Superfast were imperfect and in some instances meant that suppliers had a great deal of scope to change delivery and increase costs.

There have been assurances from DCMS that the new Project Gigabit contractual arrangements will have additional safeguards, but LBs generally have not been closely involved or had sight of these changes.

As above, legislation on wayleaves still requires additional strengthening if we are to meet 100%

- **failure “yet again” to prioritise consumers in rural areas**

As above, the picture in the hardest to meet areas remains unclear.

Hertfordshire County Council is seeking to ensure that as many of its residents and businesses have access to Full Fibre/Gigabit Capable connectivity, and although it seems clear the new programme will deliver to some of these addresses, current targets leave considerable scope for high number of these residents to miss out, or at least to be delivered well beyond 2025.