# The vital role of local expertise in national programmes

National connectivity infrastructure projects have been created by successful national policies but they need the support from local bodies to deliver on promises.

Recent news from a number of outlets including the BBC, mentioned as part of a larger story regarding infrastructure, the Climate Change Committee's (CCC) recommendation that the UK Government should prioritise broadband infrastructure over roads. An opportune comment given that today the UK economy is being supported by the legions of people working from home and significant strain has been removed from our existing road networks and has instead been placed on our communications infrastructure.

The COVID pandemic is beginning to demonstrate what a future workforce could look like and it is no surprise that FTSE boards are looking at their expensive city buildings and wondering if this enforced experiment in mass home working may hold the key to a more agile future. Capital investment vehicles, Local Authorities and Enterprise Agencies are also looking at development and regeneration plans and wondering if they now need the same volume of new office accommodation, or if more flexible spaces may be needed instead. The infrastructure we use to transport people is under strain. Daily reports of train problems were the norm before COVID dominated our 24hr news cycle and so the CCC recommendation has merit. As we understand it, the quote is about prioritisation; the CCC are not saying leave roads to rot, they are just suggesting that now is the time for technology to deliver the promised aims of government policy. To 'level up', the country needs to fix access and change what we mean by an economic return in the traditional investment business case.

Assessing the socio-economic return for infrastructure investment is difficult in a centralised governmental system. Decisions are taken at a distance from the impact area and assessments lose their tangibility the further removed from the intervention area they are. National broadband infrastructure projects have been created by successful national policies with support from local delivery engines. They have utilised direct local knowledge to first inform elements of national policy, but equally importantly they have then managed the local incentives and build and helped to drive up adoption. Local knowledge is vital to maintain a consistent approach and adherence to policy. There is also the not insignificant requirement to overcome local deployment challenges such as wayleaves, planning and traffic management, all of which is unmanageable at a national level. The suppliers are encouraged by board structures, investors and shareholders to drive for profit, but a government scheme must benefit society... equally.
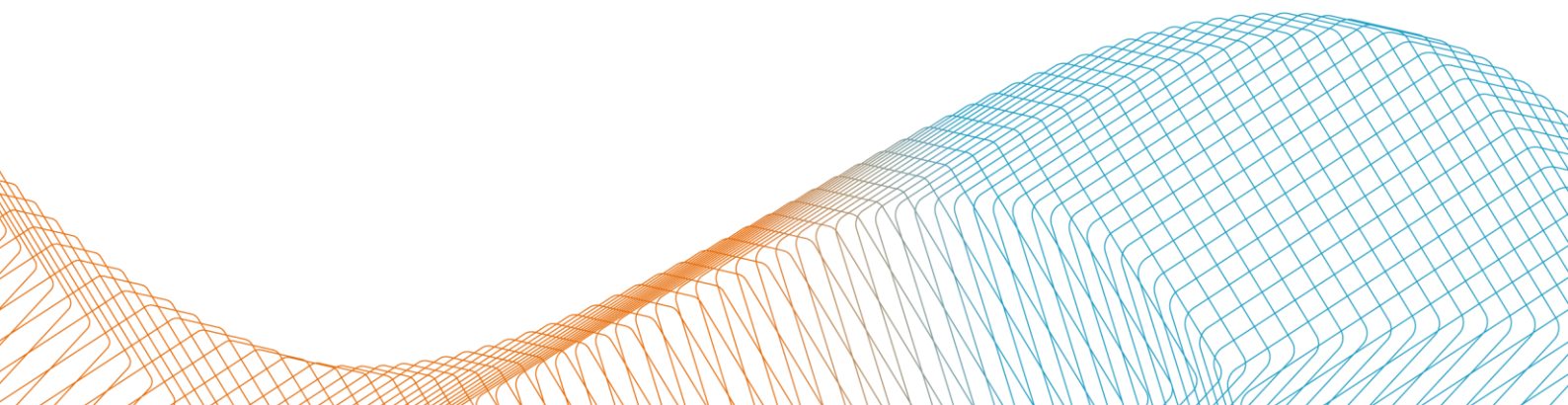
To create equality, it is vital that local bodies, be that local authorities, LEPs or Enterprise Agencies, maintain their ability to make the case for their intervention area and lobby for both private and public investment. A requirement for a build down a certain street in a local town may have 100% importance to the economic or social ambitions of that town, but this 100% drops to single digits when considered against the wider region's considerations and is well below the decimal point when considered nationally. For the local area's voice to matter in national conversations it must be an informed voice. It must be able to articulate the vision and need for an area and from this requirement the role of many so-called Digital Teams in councils and enterprise bodies across the UK have come to the fore with some councils having gone as far as creating their own supplier initiatives as is the case in Shetland, for example. Many rural areas of the UK are using digital connectivity to create a greater sense of confidence for citizens that an equitable social and economic quality of life can be achieved remote from urban centres. This reduces a perceived need to move away from rural areas that, in turn, are only sustained and sustainable with a diverse human population. Directly supporting economic, health and educational needs is at the heart of maintaining the social wellbeing of such a population and without it our rural heritage is under threat; although some of these wider social and wellbeing elements are not always easy to quantify.

Local councils and enterprise bodies are faced with conflicting demands for their limited resources and as a result it would be easy to pull back from direct project and programme involvement. Across the UK there is now a universal service obligation to ensure that access is available to all citizens (with caveats); in Scotland there is a programme to ensure that there is a 30Mbps service available to 100% of properties, and across the UK there is a Shared Rural Network (SRN) project for mobile coverage, a national fibre programme and a future rural based programme to deploy fibre in some of the areas considered uneconomic for commercial build. It would be all too easy to suggest that the work of the local digital team is done and that the national programmes will conclude any outstanding infrastructure requirements - but that will not be the case and evidence of this sits within the council and enterprise body teams themselves. At each intervention the hardest to reach and uneconomic builds are left until the last 5% becomes the almost impossible 0.5%. The local teams have the insight to be able to build-in the last 0.5% into the national plans. They have the local knowledge to help create the economic case for a build or to make the social case for need. There is a real danger that future decisions at a national level will be hampered by a lack of local knowledge now. Those national priorities will be social and economic, they will be e-health and monitoring and they will be about a personal just-in-time economy. The COVID pandemic further emphasises that no citizens should be left out of that discussion and all should have access to the benefits they will bring.
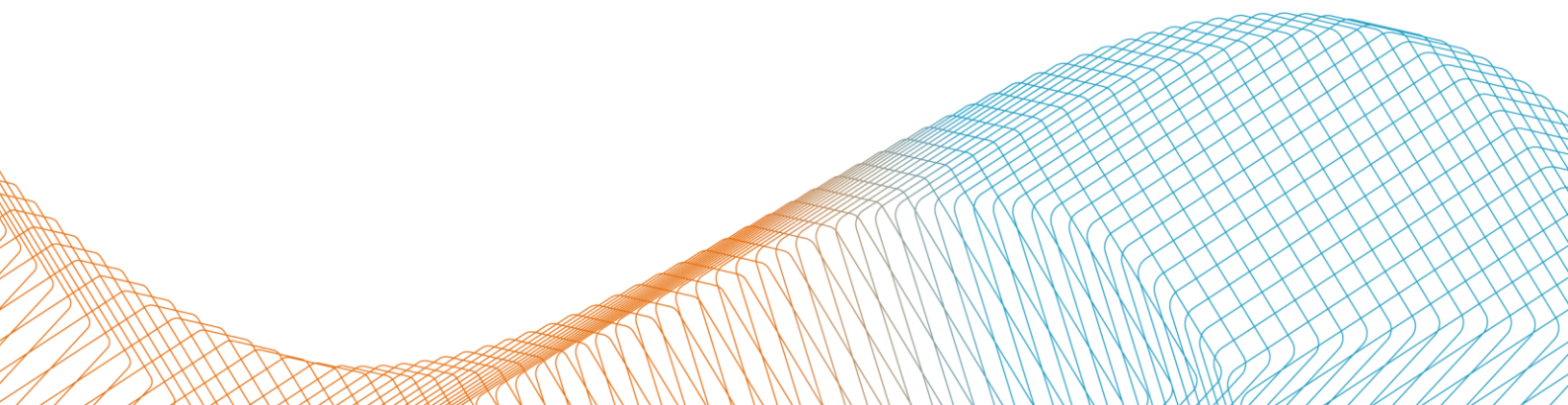
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