



THE BENEFITS OF MOBILE COMMUNICATIONS

Mobile telecommunications, which were regarded as a luxury only two decades ago, are now ubiquitous, and vitally important to individuals, to communities, to businesses, and to the wider economy. Local authorities have an important role to play in enabling access to mobile communications for their communities.

There are now more than 81 million mobile connections in the UK as a whole, and around 4.8 million customers now access mobile broadband via a laptop and dongle.¹ Mobile is fast becoming the web access medium of choice, fuelled by the growth of smartphones, tablets, and laptop and dongle. The increasing use of mobile broadband services via dongles and smartphones resulted in a 67% increase in data transferred over the UK's mobile networks in 2010. At the end of 2010, over a quarter of adults (27 per cent) and almost half of teenagers (47 per cent) owned a smartphone and 28 per cent of people use their mobile phones for internet access.² By 2015, 75% of all phones will be smart phones, and by 2014, 20% of computers will be tablets.³

What is more important than these statistics, impressive though they may be, are the benefits mobile communications bring to individuals. Connecting to the Internet via a mobile device allows people to access a wide range of central and local government services; to do research for a school project or apply to university; to manage their bank account and pay bills; to apply for a job; or to buy groceries.

Most local authorities' services are now available online, and many councils have recognised the growth of smartphone use and introduced mobile phone applications to provide instant access to services, or to allow residents to report litter, dumped rubbish, pot holes and road repairs, or anti-social behaviour. The health services also benefit from good mobile connectivity. The advantages of being able to summon the emergency services using a mobile phone is obvious, but simply sending text messages to patients means fewer missed appointments, and saves the NHS both time and money.

The Internet is now also increasingly important in education. A fifth of teachers think it 'essential for children to be able to surf the web to be able to do their homework properly, while 61% think it 'advisable'.⁴ Digital literacy and connectivity are to the present day what reading, writing and the provision of libraries were to the Nineteenth century.

Today, people are more likely to rely on a mobile phone than on a landline: around 15% of UK households rely on mobile as their only means of voice telephony, while only 6% have

¹ Ofcom, Communications Market Report 2011

² *ibid*

³ Industry estimates -Spider Online 2011

⁴ TES survey summer 2010

only a fixed line. People in socio-economic groups D & E are even more likely than the better-off to live in a mobile-only household, or to access the Internet using a mobile connection than they are to have just a landline or to access the web through a fixed connection: one in four DE households were mobile-only in Q1 2011.⁵

Good mobile connectivity is also vital to the business sector. Its importance to 'new economy sectors', including those in the creative industries, is obvious, but it is also vital to more traditional sectors, such as manufacturing, tourism, and food and drink. The Internet allows firms to research markets, advertise their wares to potential customers, and to take orders. And while many people now shop online, others also use the internet to complement their more traditional shopping habits, to find the location of a particular store, or to check whether particular items are in stock.

Local authorities have an important role to play in enabling access to all these services for their communities. Mobile phones, dongles, and tablet computers cannot work without a network of base stations (masts), and so local planning authorities should actively support the expansion of the electronic communications networks, including telecommunications and high speed broadband.

⁵ Ofcom, Communications Market Report 2011
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