INDEPENDENT SURVEY

FarrPoint Digital Connectivity Survey 2024

31st January 2024

Contents

Summary

This is the second FarrPoint Digital Connectivity Survey and over the last year, we've consistently heard how **Local Authorities continue to have a key role in supporting the rollout of digital connectivity.**

Local Authorities continue to develop or deliver their digital strategies. As with last year, some respondents stated that connectivity forms part of a wider digital strategy whilst others stated that digital connectivity is still not seen as a priority within the organisation. It is clear that many Local Authorities are under significant financial pressure, and in some cases, this is leading to a reduced focus on supporting digital connectivity rollout, or indeed take-up of services.

The role of digital champions has been raised by many different voices this year. Most Local Authorities responded by saying that they have a digital champion in place, however, it is clear that there continues to be differing opinions as to what a digital champion is, who this should be within an organisation, what their role entails and how they are funded. **There is clearly more work needed to ensure that Local Authorities better understand the role of digital champions in supporting the rollout of digital connectivity in their area.**

Whilst gigabit connectivity deployment continues to progress, a number of respondents are **more focused on ensuring those who still have poor quality connectivity are reached to make sure they aren't left further behind.**

For the second year, the importance of 5G continues to divide opinion, and in many cases, until more evidence of specific benefits is available, **ubiquitous 4G coverage and sufficient capacity were seen as more beneficial and a higher priority.**

Disappointingly, local barriers to deployment remain with ongoing issues around street works, seeking permits and inconsistent planning processes which are all still hampering deployment.

We hope to see more progress in tackling these long-standing challenges in the coming year, and would **encourage Local Authorities and other public bodies, telecom operators and central government to work together to reduce deployment barriers.**

Affordability ranked highest in the barriers to residential take-up, reflecting the continuing cost-of-living crisis. However, we've seen numerous cases where new services are as cheap, or cheaper than existing services and we suggest **more needs to be done to engage with customers to promote the benefits of new services available and to encourage take-up.**

More positively, this year's survey has seen an increase in the number of Local Authorities who are now deploying or considering smart projects as they look to maximise the benefits of improved connectivity**. We hope to see continued growth in using connectivity to drive smart solutions over 2024.**

The results of this year's survey have shown a notable increase in the reported awareness and preparedness for the analogue landline and 2G/3G switch-offs. **Local Authorities have done the least work on 2G/3G which raises concerns given the imminent nature of the 3G switch-off. Over one-third responded that they have no budget allocated to addressing any resulting changes to affected services.** This means the funds will have to be found elsewhere if services are to be maintained, adding further pressures to already stretched Local Authority budgets.

Finally, despite the importance of climate action, Local Authorities are not articulating the contribution that digital connectivity can make to climate targets. **We hope to see a change in this approach over the next year as digital connectivity plays a significant role in the path to Net Zero if local and national targets are to be met.**

Foreword

Dija Oliver

DIGITAL PROJECT MANAGER
SWANSEA BAY CITY DEAL

I am delighted to be invited to take part in this survey of digital connectivity across the UK local authorities. This is such a fast-moving area that capturing the thoughts and views of others involved in similar digital roles is really helpful.

My role as Digital Project Manager for the Swansea Bay City Deal builds on my experience in Carmarthenshire County Council where I have been involved in successive digital transformation projects. The drive to digitise and improve the way we deliver public services will only be successful if our residents and businesses have the connectivity required to access them. The City Deal brings wider opportunities to our area, but we are still faced with the same challenges on connectivity. Unlike some areas of the UK, we face significant gaps in the underlying infrastructure, both fixed and mobile. The challenge is understanding the issue and future plans, and then identifying possible routes to deliver improvements.

Our approach is centred around four key themes. We've funded digital champions in each of our four local authorities across the region to work with industry, government, and our most poorly connected communities and businesses. Our Connected Places theme is focused on delivering gigabit connectivity to our strategically important public sector sites and economic growth zones to help build a sustainable digital economy and support improved public services. We have very hard to reach areas of our region and our rural workstream plays its part in helping to ensure that everyone can access better broadband services. And finally, we recognise the role of advanced wireless networks, our teams are facilitating the rollout of 4G/5G across the region with 5G centres of excellence planned for sectors such as health and wellbeing and creative industries.

Digital infrastructure is a cross-cutting theme through all of the Swansea Bay City Deal projects and programmes, it is essential to the delivery of our partners' digital transformation strategies, the economic growth of our region and improving social inclusion.

We firmly believe that we can only achieve the aspirations of our programme by working collaboratively with industry, government, and our partners. This involves sharing both successes and challenges, using data to make decisions and being agile in our approach.

This is why I particularly welcome this initiative by FarrPoint and the work that has been done to collate the information which goes into this report. By sharing these findings across authorities and encouraging debate, we will all benefit from our shared experiences, which can only help us reach our ambitions.

Introduction

Dr. Andrew Muir
FARRPOINT CEO

Welcome to our second independent Connectivity Survey which reviews and compares priorities and barriers that digital leaders face within local authority areas across the UK. Following the first ever survey of this type which we reported on last year, for 2024 we also report on the difference a year makes and how views may have changed.
Responses were collected throughout December 2023 via an online survey and follow up video interviews.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all respondents who took part and also Dija Oliver for her introductory remarks.

This report contains analysis of the responses, some particular quotes we felt worth highlighting, and some useful additional information from our own work on certain topics.
As ever we welcome your feedback on any particular points and areas you might find useful in future reports. Please email me directly at andrew.muir@farrpoint.com.
We hope you find the report interesting.

Strategy and Planning

Strategy and Planning

Digital connectivity continues to be seen as a key enabler for both fostering economic growth and efficient service delivery, with fast, reliable connectivity still high on the priority list for both national and regional governments. To ensure connectivity is available where and when it's needed, a digital connectivity strategy remains an invaluable asset, setting out not only clear ambitions but also a set of actions, deliverables and timescales required to achieve these objectives. We wanted to see how things had developed in the last year and to understand if these strategies were being updated and where progress had been made.

Over 50% of respondents had a strategy that was under 3 years old, which is a small but notable increase over last year's survey response. Of the 15% who have a strategy that is older than 3 years, our follow-up discussions suggest this is due to a mix of reasons. Some strategies are still in delivery, and others are now including connectivity as part of a wider digital strategy which focuses on connectivity benefits maximisation rather than solely on connectivity infrastructure delivery.

There was no notable change in the number of respondents who said they didn't have a digital connectivity strategy, with some of those stating that connectivity was either included within a wider digital strategy, or in some cases that it simply was not a priority for the Local Authority in the current financial climate where budgets continue to be squeezed and resources are being focussed on meeting statutory requirements. However, we again note that this figure could be understated as those who don't see digital connectivity as a priority are also likely to be without a strategy and may not have responded to the survey.

Overall, the responses suggest that digital connectivity remains a priority for many Local Authorities despite the significant gains made in both fixed and mobile coverage over the last year. More attention is now focussed on reaching those that are still yet to be connected alongside looking at how to maximise the benefits of the significant public and private sector investment made thus far.

"It's not seen as a local priority as we don't have as much ownership now it's being delivered centrally by BDUK alongside providers own commercial delivery".

"Our Digital Strategy won't be updated before the local / national elections this year, as the results could impact our wider strategic direction and priorities".

"Our strategy is moving on from trying to get digital connectivity to how to make best use of it".

"We're developing a new Digital Strategy, one that will include not only connectivity but also other aspects like inclusion and AI".

Based on feedback we received throughout the year, we added some additional questions to this year's survey to identify if local authorities have a 'Digital Champion', and if so to find out a

Q.2 WE ASKED IF LOCAL AUTHORITIES HAVE A DIGITAL CHAMPION.

Yes, but this is an add-on area of responsibility to an existing role	**47%**
No	**30%**
Yes, this is a dedicated role tasked with helping achieve the organisation's digital strategy / vision for the area	**23%**

little more about their role.

The overwhelming response was that most Local Authorities do have a digital champion in place (70%). Interestingly, follow-up conversations with a sample of respondents suggest that there continues to be different views or understanding as to what a digital champion is, who this should be within an organisation, and what their role entails. Given the importance of digital champions as highlighted in recent reports by the National Infrastructure Commission, MobileUK, and the Digital Connectivity Forum, there is clearly more work needed to ensure that Local Authorities better understand the role of digital champions to support the deployment of digital connectivity in their area.

We also asked which department or area within the Local Authority digital champions sit within, with responses showing the majority sit within either economic development (38%)

or IT/ICT (43%), with the remaining 19% placed in a variety of other departments. This again highlights a degree of inconsistency in how different Local Authorities consider the role of a digital champion and reinforces the need for further work in this area.

Where there is a digital champion in place, over 75% of respondents told us that this role is funded as business as usual via their internal budget, whilst 14% are funded to deliver a specific project or programme. The remaining 9% are funded via other mechanisms such as regional growth deals, city deals, etc.

A number of those we spoke to told us that they had been able to utilise remaining gainshare funds from earlier superfast contracts to fund their digital teams and ongoing activities. Others told us that any remaining gainshare funding had been used to help alleviate other budgetary pressures within the Local Authority.

Digital champions play a vital role in supporting the rollout of digital connectivity. They provide a useful point of contact between relevant parties during both planning and delivery and can help overcome barriers or obstacles whilst also promoting the benefits of improved connectivity internally and externally. Where this is successful, areas have seen increased investment and are typically better connected than areas without a digital champion.

"We do have Digital Champions, however the title is inconsistently used meaning different things to different people which can result in big differences in roles".

"A Digital Champion needs to be someone in a senior leadership role, who can promote the digital strategy and work of the team delivering it, in addition to being able to lobby where required to help achieve the desired outcomes".

"Funding for the Digital Champion role or wider team is always a challenge".

"The problem is the term 'Digital', it gets used for different things so maybe needs a rebrand".

"From a digital exclusion perspective there should actually be a few digital champions, not just one".

We also wanted to understand to what extent Local Authorities are collaborating with regional partners on digital connectivity priorities.

WE ASKED IF LOCAL AUTHORITIES COLLABORATE WITH REGIONAL PARTNERS ON DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY.

51%	43%	6%	0%
Yes, closely	Yes, but not enough	No, but it would be very useful to make connections	No, I don't see the benefits

Unsurprisingly almost all respondents (94%) told us that they do collaborate with regional partners on digital connectivity matters, with only a small number (6%) stating that they don't but would find it useful to make these connections. Neighbouring Local Authorities came out top in terms of collaborators followed by regional Combined Authorities and then other organisations such as other sub-regional groups or partnerships (GLA, TfL, Digital Innovation Zones, etc).

Local Enterprise Partnerships were also mentioned, although this was the least common response which reflects the UK Government's decision to withdraw central government support (core funding) for Local Enterprise Partnerships from April 2024. With their functions being transferred to local and combined authorities, we are likely to see more collaboration with both neighbouring Local Authorities and regional Combined Authorities as this takes effect.

The responses to this question are encouraging as digital connectivity infrastructure does not adhere to local government boundaries, meaning a regional approach can be hugely beneficial to all parties when planning and deploying infrastructure or considering the benefits that can be achieved.

REPORT: LOCAL AUTHORITIES AS CONNECTIVITY ENABLERS.

This Digital Connectivity Forum and FarrPoint report highlights that the UK's rollout of gigabit-capable broadband and mobile connectivity would benefit from improvements in communication, collaboration and consistency between local authorities and the telecoms industry.

Read the full case study here:
farrpoint.com/news/local-authorities-connectivity-enablers-report

Local Authorities as Connectivity Enablers
End of Study Report
July 2023

Before looking forward to the priorities for 2024, we wanted to review where the most progress had been observed in 2023.

WE ASKED **WHERE THE MOST PROGRESS WAS OBSERVED** IN 2023, RANKED BY THE FOLLOWING.

1st	More areas covered by gigabit broadband
2nd	More areas covered by 4G
3rd	Increased adoption of available digital connectivity and services by residents and businesses
4th	More areas covered by 5G
5th	More smart places / IoT innovation
6th	Ensuring digital connectivity is aligned with net-zero targets

In terms of progress observed during 2023 this year's survey responses largely echo what we were told last year, with more areas covered by gigabit-capable broadband showing the most progress, closely followed by 4G. Increased adoption featured in third place followed by 5G coverage. Smart places / IoT and ensuring digital connectivity is aligned with net zero targets remain at the bottom of the list in terms of progress observed.

This year we also introduced a new answer option to better understand progress in take-up and adoption, which is increasingly important to digital infrastructure investors seeking reassurance on their ROI. It is good to see adoption featuring 3rd in the rankings in terms of progress in 2023.

It's noteworthy that ensuring digital connectivity is aligned with net-zero targets remains at the bottom of the list for the second year in terms of progress. Given the high-profile of the climate change agenda, which has seen many Local Authorities declare a 'climate emergency' in their area, this suggests that there is still limited understanding around the net zero benefits of improved digital connectivity. In addition, there remains a disconnect between those responsible for delivering digital connectivity and those responsible for helping tackle climate change within the organisation.

" *Whilst there has been progress in gigabit rollout, we're starting to see a slowdown in Altnet deployment as they shift to a greater focus on increasing take-up".*

"4G coverage hasn't improved in our area, it's not bad enough to be included in the SRN Programme, and there's been no new or upgraded deployment by the market". "

Looking ahead to 2024, we asked what local authorities' priorities were for the coming year across fixed, mobile and smart technologies:
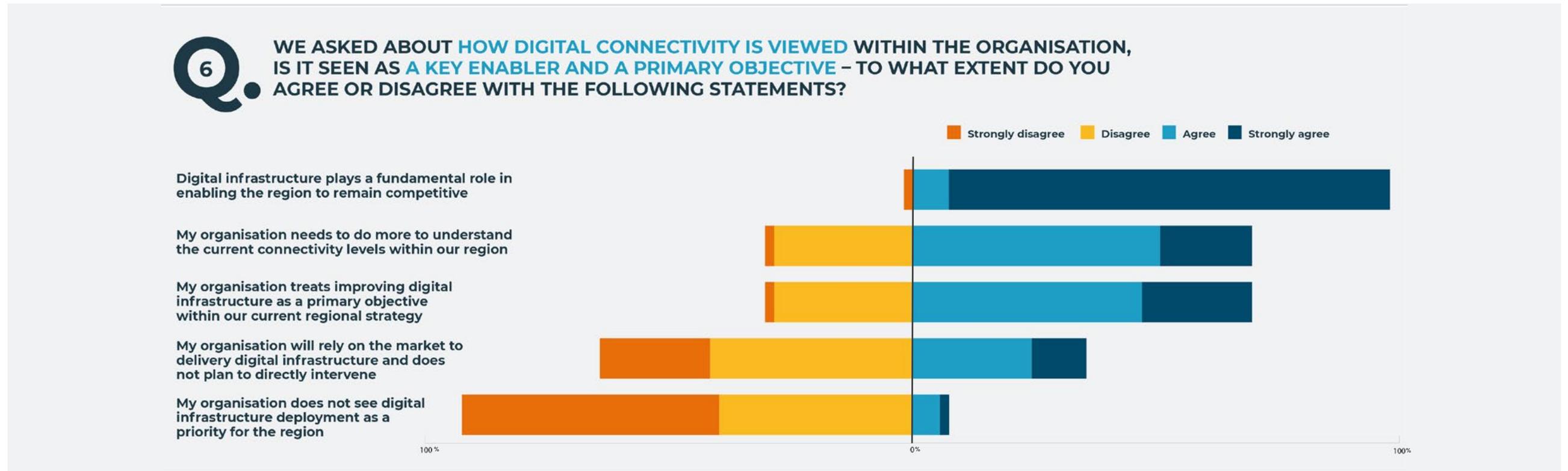
Results show that the same priorities from last year remain in 2024. Notably, there is more focus on getting areas covered by gigabit-capable broadband which might be reflective of the increase in activity both in commercial deployment and the number of procurements undertaken by BDUK as part of Project Gigabit. Several respondents reiterated the need to ensure that everyone is connected to good superfast levels of digital connectivity first before providing even faster gigabit-capable speeds. Otherwise, this could widen the digital divide between those with poor coverage and those with gigabit even further.

This was equally noted for 4G and 5G, with a strong desire to have good quality, ubiquitous 4G coverage available before concentrating on 5G. However, there was some variation with regards to prioritising 5G coverage, with some areas looking to leap-frog 4G in areas of poor coverage by pursuing 5G instead.
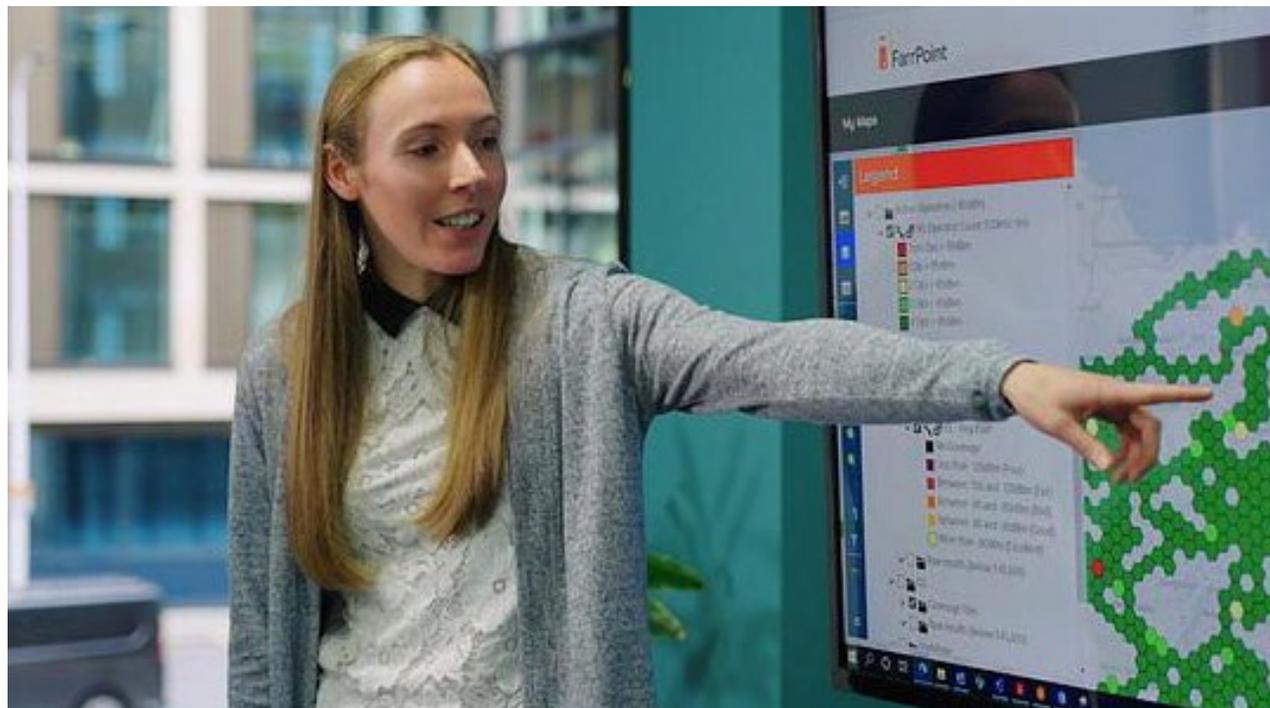
More surprising is that smart places initiatives remain low on the list of priorities despite hearing from several local authorities that this is an area they are looking to pursue or expand. The alignment of digital connectivity to net-zero is ranked as the lowest priority two years in a row. We continue to observe that local authorities appear to focus on the more established routes of reducing carbon emissions like making their buildings more energy efficient rather than looking at the significant contribution that digital connectivity can make in tackling climate change.

To further understand the role that connectivity has within the organisation as an enabler of wider economic benefits, we asked a number of questions about the role the organisation plays alongside the supplier market and national interventions:

WE ASKED ABOUT HOW DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY IS VIEWED WITHIN THE ORGANISATION, IS IT SEEN AS A KEY ENABLER AND A PRIMARY OBJECTIVE – TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?

Legend: Strongly disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly agree

- Digital infrastructure plays a fundamental role in enabling the region to remain competitive
- My organisation needs to do more to understand the current connectivity levels within our region
- My organisation treats improving digital infrastructure as a primary objective within our current regional strategy
- My organisation will rely on the market to delivery digital infrastructure and does not plan to directly intervene
- My organisation does not see digital infrastructure deployment as a priority for the region

Responses followed a similar pattern to those received last year, with almost all stating that digital infrastructure plays a fundamental role in an area's competitiveness. Interestingly, significantly more respondents said that their organisation needs to do more to understand the current connectivity levels within their region when compared to last year (up from 54% last year to 70% in this year's survey). This is surprising as it might have been expected that between local knowledge, the work of BDUK on Project Gigabit, and an active market, this information would be more readily available.

There is also a notable increase in the number of respondents who stated that their organisation does not treat improving digital infrastructure as a primary objective within their current regional strategy. This appears to be because they believe this will be done at a national level, by BDUK or national devolved government, or as a result of commercial deployment. In some cases, respondents were focused on delivering their statutory duties and responsibilities and as such are withdrawing from these other areas.

Q.7 HOW GOOD IS YOUR ORGANISATION'S KNOWLEDGE OF DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY COVERAGE IN YOUR AREA?

32% / 64% / 4%

- Reasonably informed, we have pockets of good information
- Fully informed, we understand what's in place and what is coming
- Very limited knowledge of coverage in our area

2023: 40% / 60%

Similar to last year, most respondents feel they are at least reasonably well informed about coverage. However, there was an increase in respondents who said they only had pockets of good information, and fewer stated that they feel fully informed about current and future planned coverage.

4% of respondents stated that they had very little knowledge of coverage levels in their area, which is a notable change from last year (0%) and is perhaps a result of changes in staffing within Local Authorities as experienced digital teams are lost.

We asked an additional question this year around which forms of digital infrastructure local authorities felt they have the most accurate coverage data. Responses showed that future

planned mobile coverage was significantly less well understood, which continues to be a concern and suggests mobile infrastructure providers are still reluctant to share their plans with Local Authorities.

It was noted that there remains a lack of confidence in the coverage data available and that ongoing efforts should be made to improve both the accuracy and availability of current and planned fixed and mobile coverage data.

"We've maybe been too focussed on fixed connectivity previously and need to change this to have more focus on mobile".

"We have no visibility of existing or planned cell site locations as mobile operators or infrastructure providers are typically unwilling to share this information outside of any planning application".

"We're not seeing a demand for gigabit connectivity yet, so we're focussed on delivering connectivity to the few percent who still don't even have superfast speeds yet".
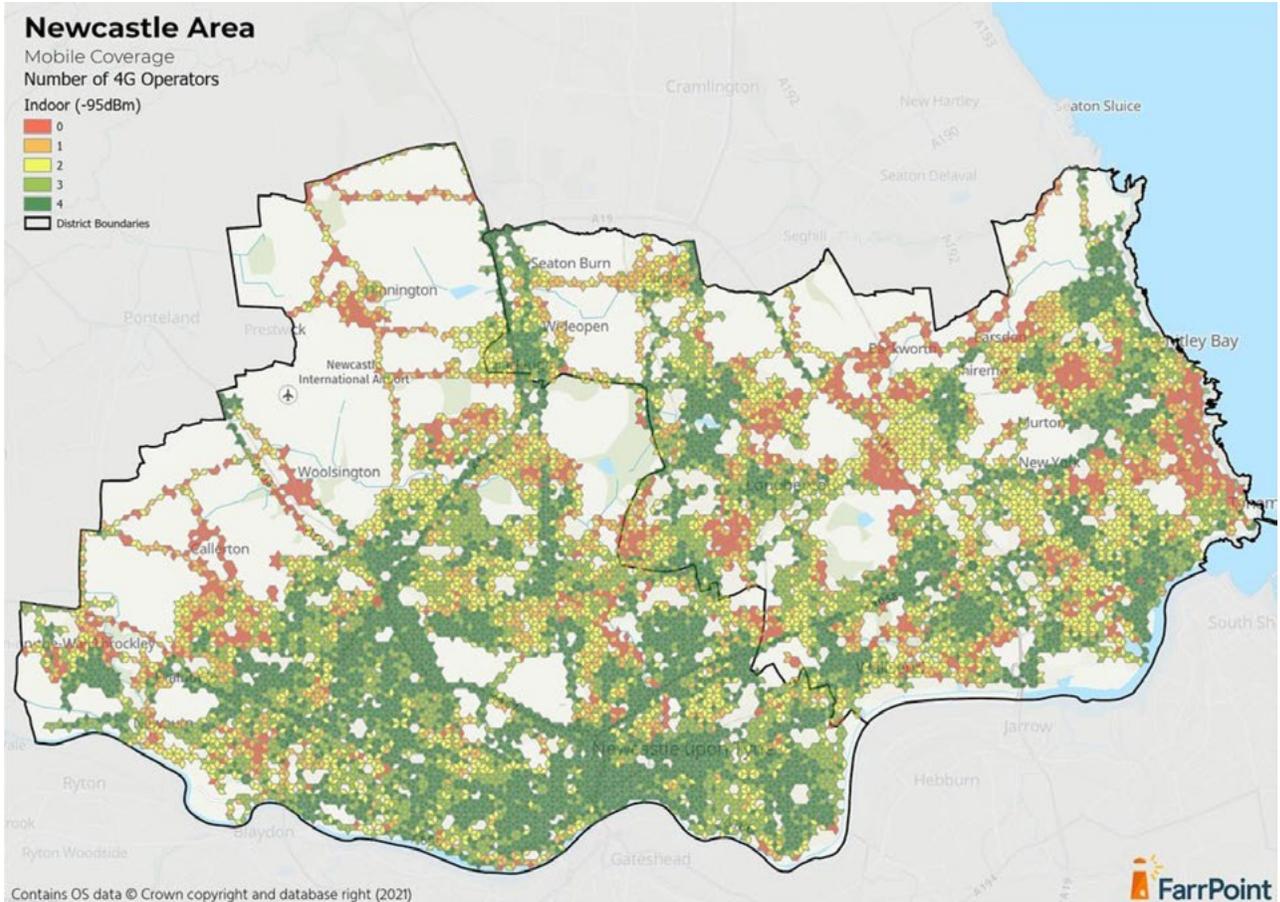
"We know there are a small percentage of people who won't be covered by commercial rollout or Project Gigabit, but not necessarily where they are or what we can do to address it".

"We're scoping solutions for our rural area, however there are no easy answers as 4G is seen as unreliable, FWA isn't viable in the geography and LEO considered too expensive for the ongoing monthly cost".

CASE STUDY: AN INDEPENDENT 4G COVERAGE MAP OF NEWCASTLE AND NORTH TYNESIDE

Read the full case study here:
farrpoint.com/news/mobile-coverage-map-newcastle

Newcastle Area
Mobile Coverage
Number of 4G Operators
Indoor (-95dBm)

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- District Boundaries

Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right (2021)
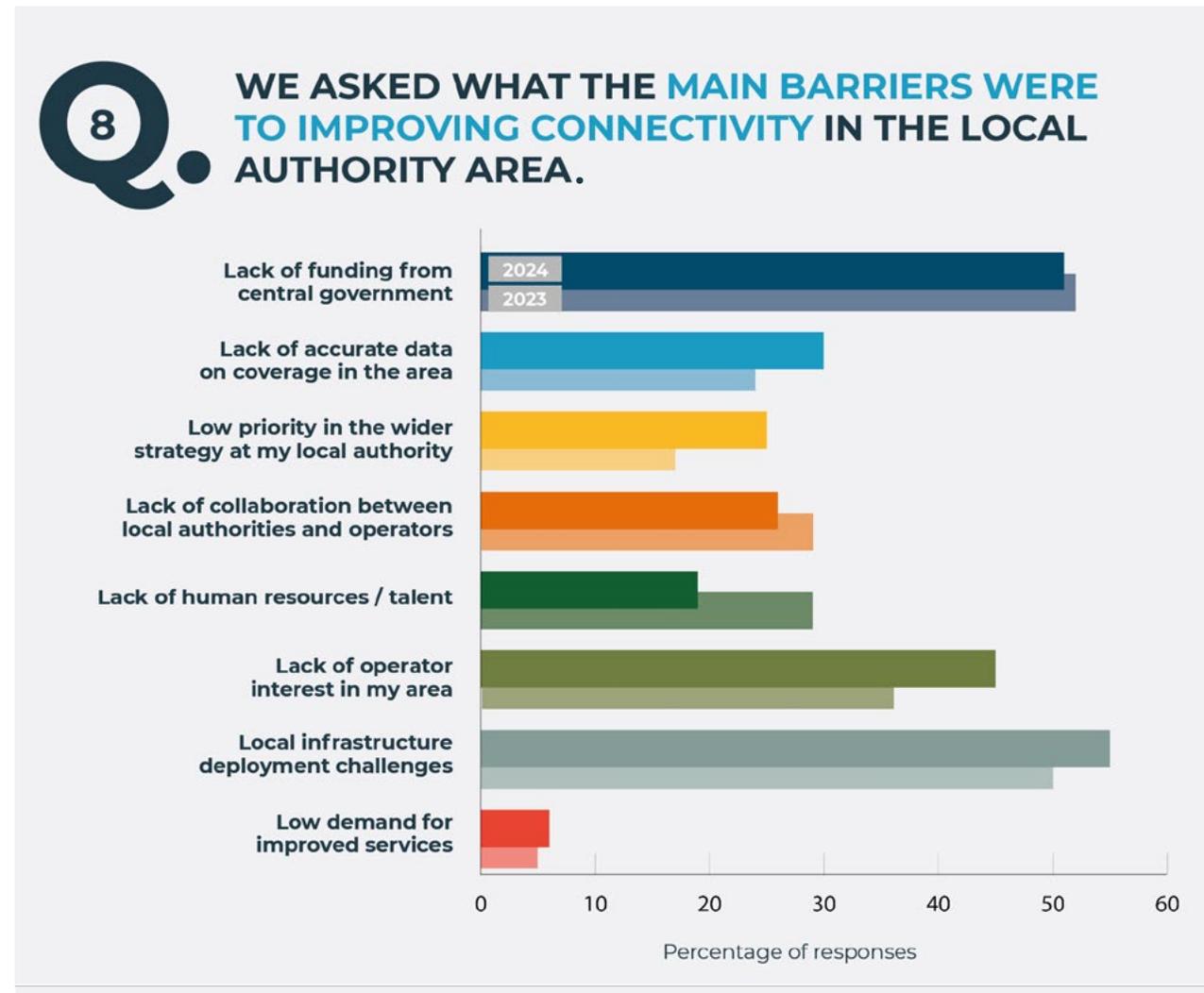
Barriers

Barriers

Whilst a significant amount of work has already been done to reduce or remove barriers to improved digital connectivity, both within Local Authorities and in areas outside their control, clearly challenges remain. As such we wanted to understand where Local Authorities believe these barriers still exist and to explore if there were different barriers for business and residential take-up of connectivity.

As with last year's survey low demand for improved connectivity is not perceived as a challenge, however, local infrastructure deployment challenges are now perceived as the biggest barrier, overtaking lack of central government funding as the biggest barrier from last year's survey.

This continues to reflect what we hear, with ongoing issues around street works, seeking permits and sometimes inconsistent planning processes which are all still hampering deployment.

It also appears that there remains a perceived lack of market interest in deployment, with this ranking third on the list of barriers to deployment for the second year in a row. This suggests that there needs to be more work done to improve communication between national government, Local Authorities and the market.

WE ASKED WHAT THE **MAIN BARRIERS WERE TO IMPROVING CONNECTIVITY** IN THE LOCAL AUTHORITY AREA.

"Problems with wayleaves haven't gone away which continue to act as a barrier to deployment".

"Poles and civils are still a challenge which government need to do more to address, including more requirement to share infrastructure".

"Notice to Quit's (NTQs) are a big issue for mobile operators, who are losing rooftop sites and unable to find suitable replacements which could lead to coverage getting worse not better".

"Despite wanting to offer council assets to support deployment of mobile infrastructure it can be extremely challenging finding assets where planners are happy for this infrastructure to be deployed".

The benefits of digital connectivity are not delivered purely by increasing the availability of services; subscribers and businesses need to take up these services. This is becoming an area of increasing focus to the supplier market as infrastructure build is delivered and payback on this investment is now expected.

9. WE ASKED WHAT THE BARRIERS TO TAKE-UP ARE IN THE AREA.
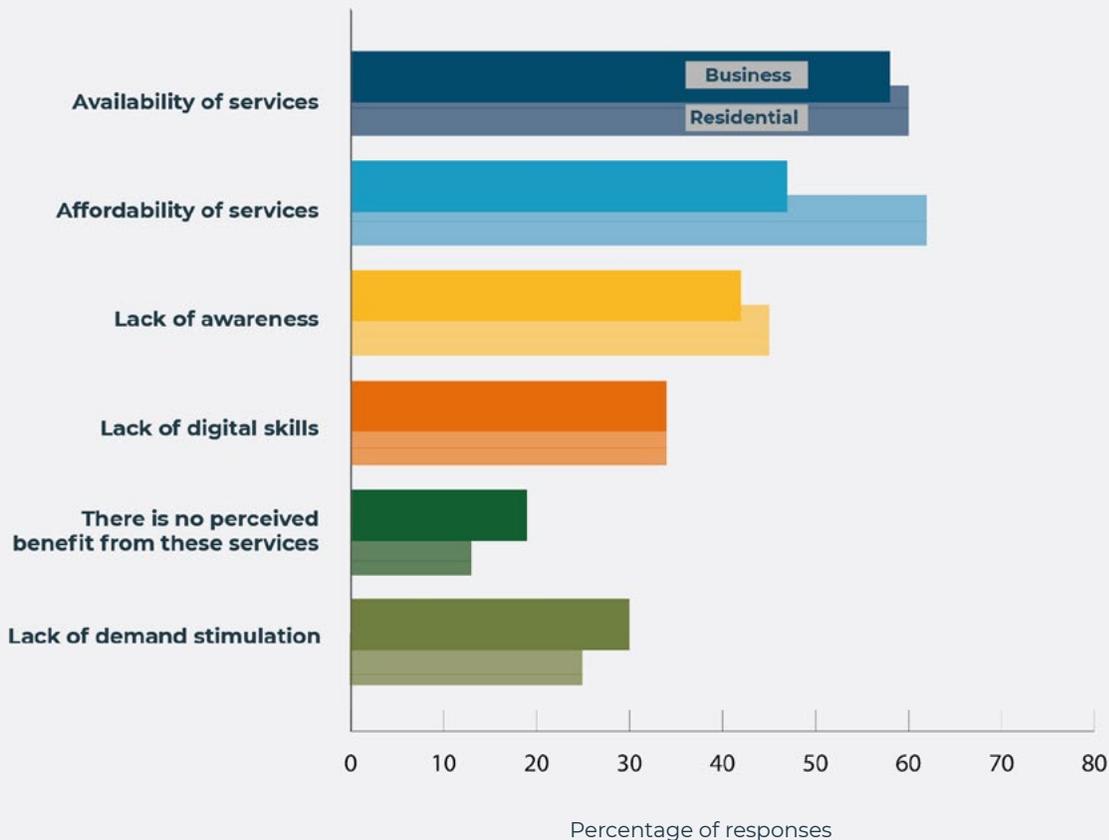
> "The ECC has made both sides, councils and telecoms providers, more nervous about engagement".

> "We're seeing an average of 70% of planning applications for new cell sites being rejected still, which clearly demonstrates more work is needed in this area".

Following last year's survey, we wanted to understand if the barriers to take-up were different for business and residential customers, recognising that these groups may have different needs and different appetites in terms of cost, etc.

Interestingly whilst the availability and affordability of services remained at the top of both business and residential barriers to take-up for the second year, availability was considered the biggest barrier for businesses. Affordability was the biggest barrier for residential take-up. On the face of it, the perceived lack of availability for businesses seems counterintuitive as whilst there are businesses in rural areas where connectivity may be lacking, those located in more urban areas should be well served by both fixed and mobile connectivity. However, it is recognised that there are in fact significant pockets of relatively poorly connected urban areas which may explain the response. It also raises the question of the suitability of the products being made available to businesses.

Less surprising is the affordability concerns for residents as we continue to experience a cost-of-living crisis where people are looking closely at their outgoings. Of course, we would still maintain that the cost of connectivity access is far outweighed by the benefits that can be achieved. This is through access to cheaper and more competitive products and services or the increased employment and social inclusion benefits that connectivity can enable.

In both cases, lack of awareness ranked third again, suggesting there is more to be done to ensure that as new or upgraded connectivity is rolled out, potential users are made aware of its availability and understand how they can switch to a new service should they wish. This is almost certainly linked to a lack of demand stimulation. Thankfully, feedback from the market suggests that there could be an increased focus on demand stimulation activities over the coming year as investors look to secure a return on their investment by increasing subscriber numbers. Alongside this, we know from some Local Authorities that despite the shift to a central delivery model for Project Gigabit, which removed the previous clawback incentive for local authorities, some are still actively considering how they can increase take-up to help realise the local benefits that improved connectivity can enable.

The Importance of Gigabit

The Importance of Gigabit

The focus from national government and industry continues to be on rolling out gigabit services with significant investments in fibre.
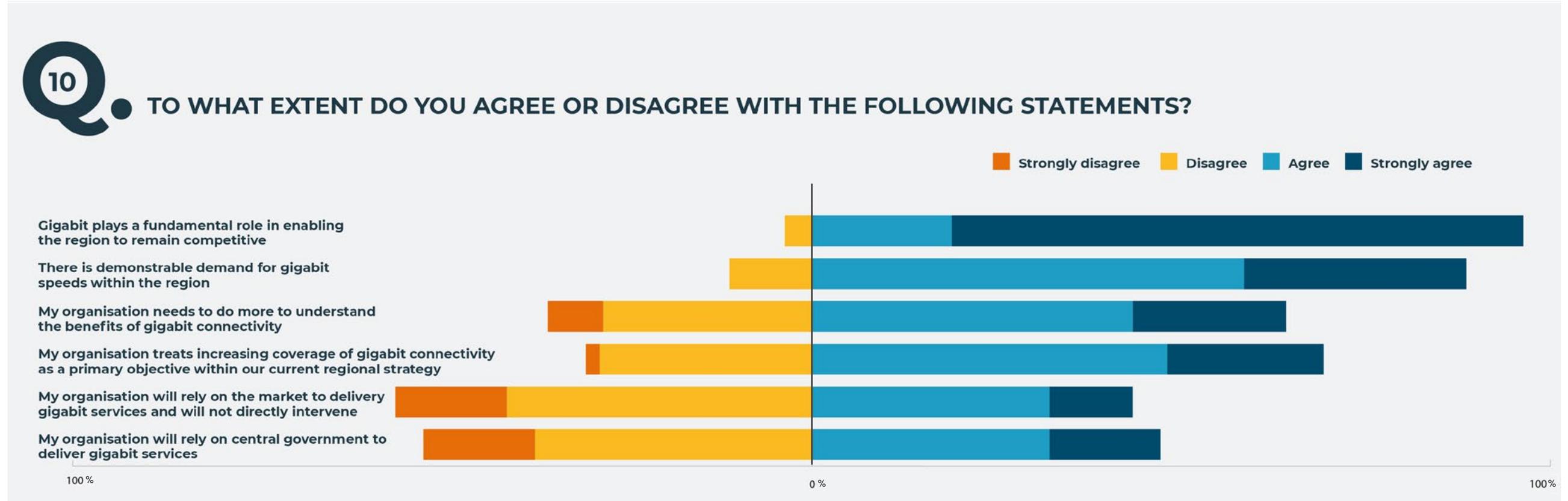
Gigabit-capable broadband coverage levels now exceed three-quarters (78%), or 23.2 million UK residential premises, up from 70% last year: this includes full fibre and upgraded cable networks that are capable of delivering download speeds of 1 Gbps or higher.

Of this, full-fibre broadband is now available at more than half of UK residential premises (57% or 17.1 million premises), sharply up from 42% last year.

(Ofcom Connected Nations 2023)

The importance of the drive for gigabit is that whilst users may not currently have a need for these speeds, the underlying infrastructure required to provide these speeds will provide a level of future proofing to meet demand for many years to come. With this policy in place, we wanted to understand how local authorities viewed this approach and the role they expected to play.

Q.10 TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?

Legend: Strongly disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly agree

Statements:
- Gigabit plays a fundamental role in enabling the region to remain competitive
- There is demonstrable demand for gigabit speeds within the region
- My organisation needs to do more to understand the benefits of gigabit connectivity
- My organisation treats increasing coverage of gigabit connectivity as a primary objective within our current regional strategy
- My organisation will rely on the market to delivery gigabit services and will not directly intervene
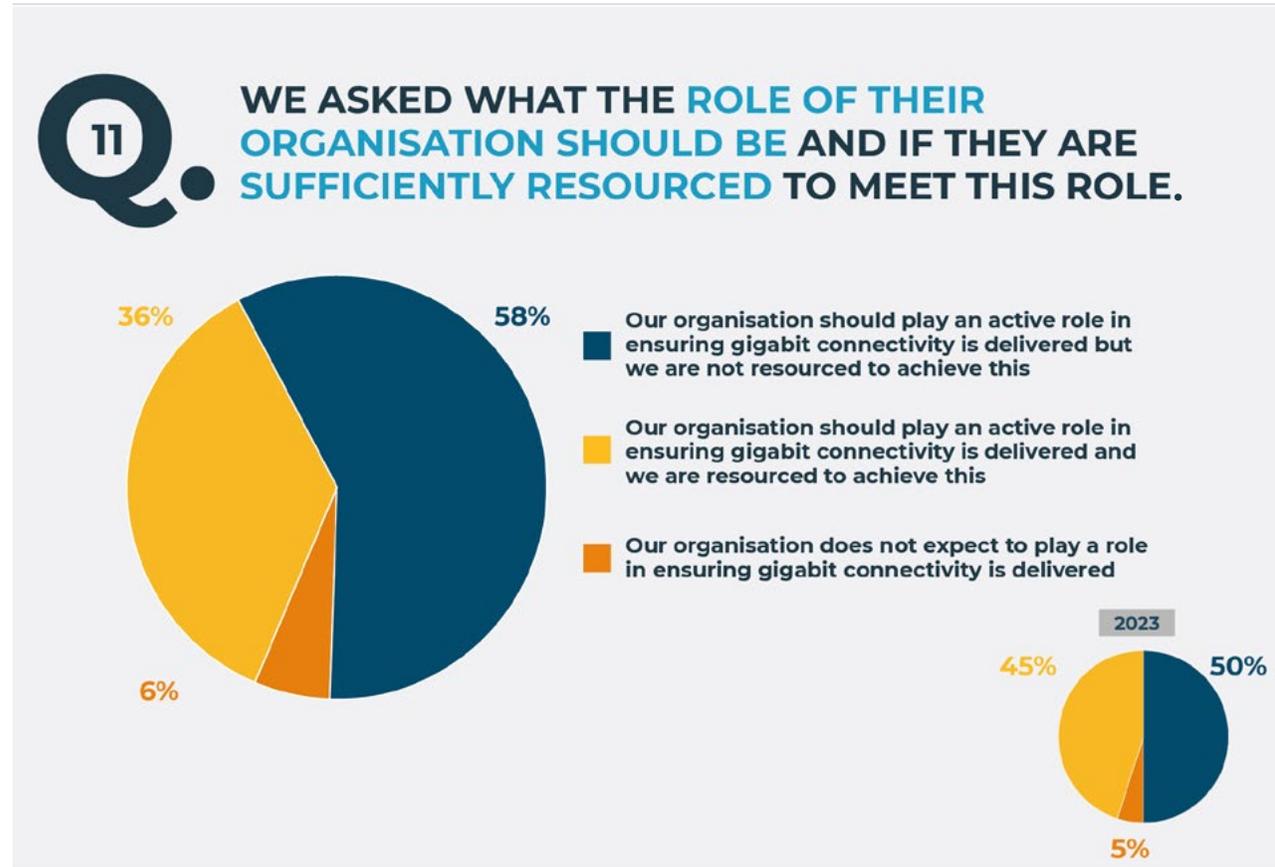- My organisation will rely on central government to deliver gigabit services

Whilst the general pattern of responses remains largely similar to last year, the responses suggest Local Authorities are placing slightly more reliance on the market and/or central government to deliver gigabit-capable infrastructure.

However, the results show that there is still an overwhelming majority who believe that gigabit connectivity plays a fundamental role in enabling their region to remain competitive alongside a demonstrable demand for gigabit speeds within regions.

Interestingly, despite the progress that's been made over the last year in the deployment of gigabit-capable infrastructure, an increased number of respondents stated that their organisation needs to do more to understand the benefits of gigabit connectivity when compared to last year's survey. This perhaps suggests that although it's seen as important, there is currently a lack of evidence of the benefits that gigabit speeds can offer over existing superfast or ultrafast services.

Q. 11 WE ASKED WHAT THE ROLE OF THEIR ORGANISATION SHOULD BE AND IF THEY ARE SUFFICIENTLY RESOURCED TO MEET THIS ROLE.

36% 58% — Our organisation should play an active role in ensuring gigabit connectivity is delivered but we are not resourced to achieve this

— Our organisation should play an active role in ensuring gigabit connectivity is delivered and we are resourced to achieve this

6% — Our organisation does not expect to play a role in ensuring gigabit connectivity is delivered

2023: 45% / 50% / 5%

continued cost pressures faced by Local Authorities, resulting in some established teams being disbanded or reduced to reflect more limited resources available.

The national gigabit intervention is being run centrally by BDUK, an executive agency sponsored by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), meaning there is a limited role for local bodies. However, there are still opportunities for local authorities to pursue local measures in parallel and as such we wanted to understand what has been done so far and what the plans were for 2024.
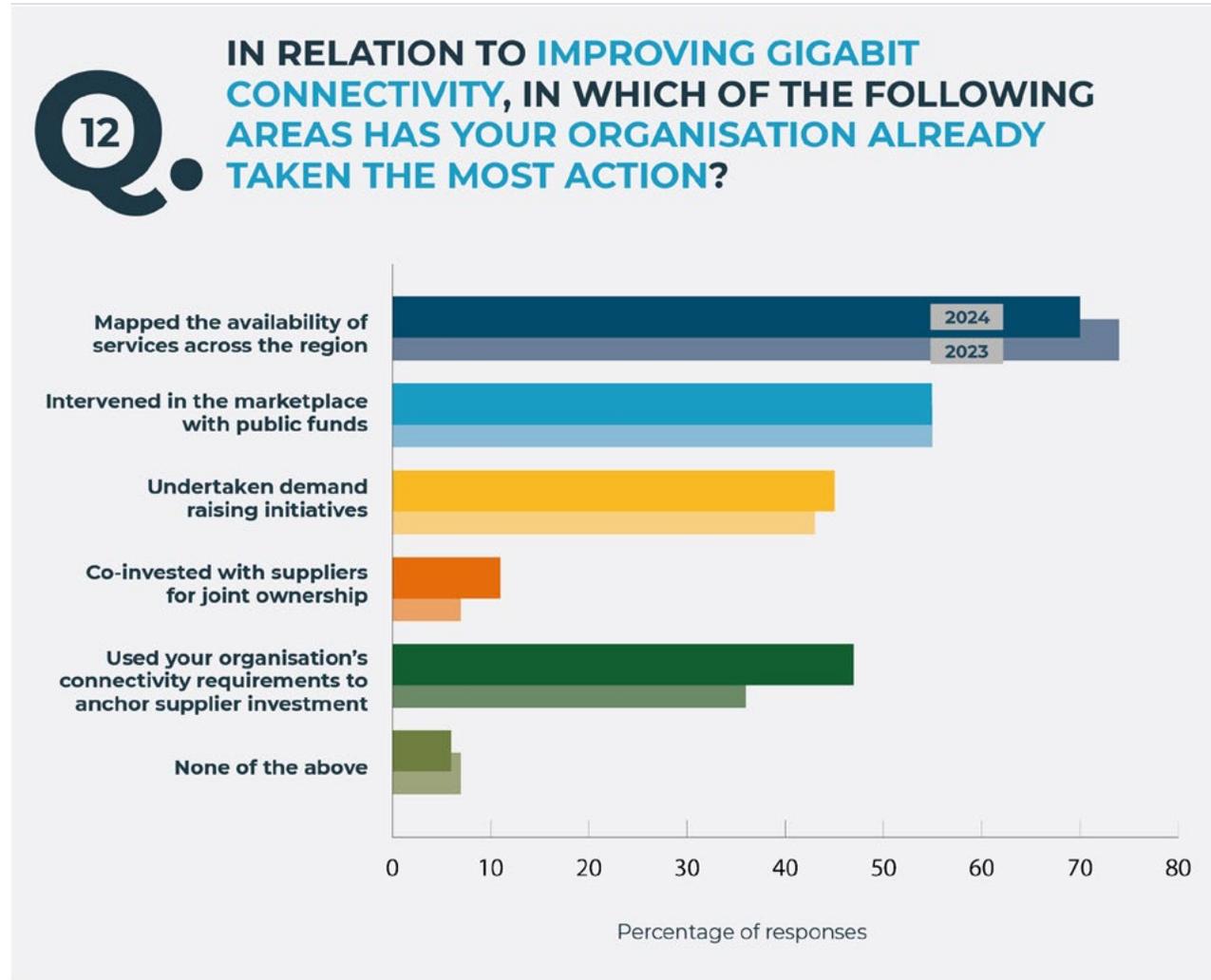

Almost all respondents continue to believe their organisation has a role to play in ensuring gigabit-capable connectivity is delivered in their area. Notably, there is an increase in the number of respondents who felt that they were not adequately resourced to achieve this, compared to last year. There is also a slight increase in those who say they don't expect their organisation to play an active role in ensuring gigabit-capable connectivity is delivered in their area. This is reflective of the earlier feedback where some respondents said they would be relying on the market and/or central government to deliver.

Our interviews confirm that there continues to be an erosion of experienced resources within Local Authorities focused on the delivery of digital infrastructure. This is partly a result of the

IN RELATION TO **IMPROVING GIGABIT CONNECTIVITY, IN WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING AREAS HAS YOUR ORGANISATION ALREADY TAKEN THE MOST ACTION?**

However, respondents told us last year that their plans for the next three years included intervention in the market using public funds and increase in demand raising activities. This suggests that these activities are yet to materialise, or that these plans have changed due to an increased reliance on the market and/or central government to deliver gigabit. Of course, this could yet happen as the future plans stated were over a 3-year period and only 1 year has passed, therefore we will track progress in these areas in future surveys.

Compared to last year, slightly more respondents stated they have used their organisation's connectivity requirements as an anchor to attract supplier investment in gigabit connectivity. This now ranks third in the responses, higher than demand-raising initiatives, which perhaps reflects the reduced focus on this in the absence of any direct payback in the form of gainshare funding.
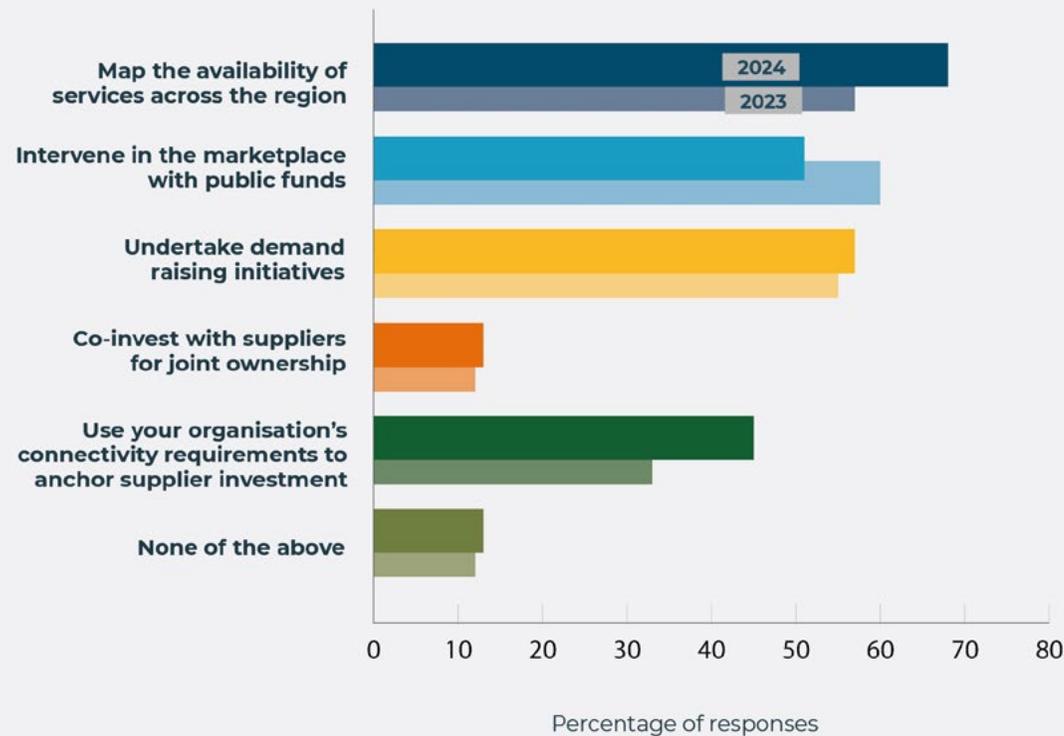
Both public/private sector co-investment in joint ownership of gigabit infrastructure and doing nothing remain at the bottom of the rankings as before, suggesting that whilst Local Authorities continue to undertake activities to understand and support the deployment of gigabit connectivity, there is still limited appetite to directly invest in any form of joint ownership model.

"We're unlikely to be as proactive in our approach as we were with the Superfast programme as we don't feel like we have any local ownership as a result of Project Gigabit being delivered centrally".

"Project Gigabit can't be successfully delivered without Local Authority support and/or involvement".

This year's response closely mirrors last year, with around 70% of respondents having mapped the availability of gigabit connectivity in their region, and 55% of respondents having undertaken some form of intervention using public funds.

IN RELATION TO IMPROVING GIGABIT CONNECTIVITY, IN WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING AREAS DOES YOUR ORGANISATION PLAN TO TAKE THE MOST ACTION IN THE NEXT THREE YEARS?

Q. 13

Map the availability of services across the region — 2024 / 2023
Intervene in the marketplace with public funds
Undertake demand raising initiatives
Co-invest with suppliers for joint ownership
Use your organisation's connectivity requirements to anchor supplier investment
None of the above

Percentage of responses

When compared with last year's responses there is a notable reduction in those who told us they have plans to intervene in the market with public funds (down from approx. 60% last year to 50% this year), however there was a small increase in those who plan to undertake demand raising initiatives over the next 3 years.

The area where most respondents stated they planned to take action over the next three years remains in the mapping of the availability of gigabit connectivity services across their region.

There appears to be an ongoing reluctance to co-invest in jointly owned infrastructure with suppliers, and there are still some respondents who stated they have no plans to undertake any of the activities listed in the next 3 years. Again, this is perhaps driven by an increased reliance on the market and/or central government to deliver increased gigabit connectivity coverage.

"We are increasingly aware that operators published plans may not cover all of the premises within an area, so we're having to consider how we fill in the gaps that are left behind".

"Project Gigabit seems to be distorting the market, with some Altnets now abandoning urban build in favour of rural areas where public subsidy is available".

The Role of 5G

The Role of 5G

5G has the potential to support many different sectors as an overall underpinning connectivity solution, from remote agriculture and rural connectivity to industrial manufacturing, transport and healthcare. The 5G market is still in its infancy as early use cases are investigated and the technical updates are delivered to allow the full capability of 5G to be made available. There has been a period of early hype followed by a period of understanding that the initial deployments only provide marginally better mobile broadband until further releases are made available and the market develops to offer more innovative solutions.

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The level of 5G coverage provided outside of premises by at least one mobile network operator (MNO) rose from 67-78% in 2022 (across a range covering Very High and High Confidence levels of availability) to 85-93% in 2023.

Landmass coverage for 5G across individual MNOs is steadily increasing; however, it still remains relatively low overall, ranging from 11% to 38% of the landmass at High Confidence, and 6% to 26% at the Very High Confidence level (up from 6% to 16% and 3% to 12% respectively last year).

(Ofcom Connected Nations 2023)

We wanted to understand the view from local authorities and where they could see the most benefit of 5G in their area.
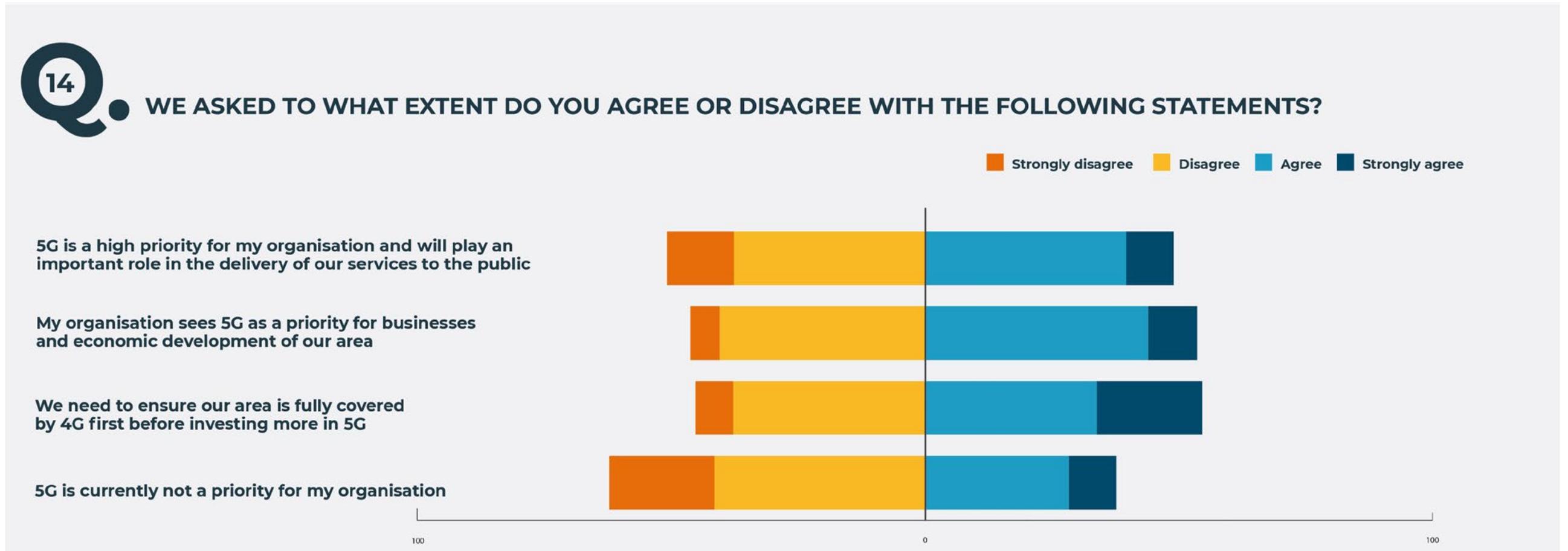
5G still seems to divide opinion, with close to an even split between those respondents who see 5G as a priority for their organisation or the local economy versus those who do not. Interestingly, these results do not align with what we've been hearing over the last year, where there is still a perception that getting good quality, ubiquitous coverage and capacity of 4G is a higher priority in both urban and rural areas. Perhaps this is indicating differing perspectives between those actively working on 5G projects and those who are not. The business case and additional benefits that 5G could potentially deliver are still not widely understood or accepted. This is reflected in the responses to question 5 on strategic priorities where respondents ranked 4G coverage 3rd, just above 5G in 4th place.

We expect this will change as use cases which show the additional benefits 5G can deliver become clearer. However, this may not fully materialise until 5G Stand-Alone infrastructure is more widely available which can unlock the true potential of 5G. In the interim, we may see an increase in the use of 5G private networks to deliver specific use cases, with many of these being business-led rather than as a result of a drive by Local Authorities to increase coverage of public 5G networks.

Feedback from respondents and more broadly recognised over the last year has been a lingering hesitance from Local Authorities to actively support 5G deployment due to ongoing public hostility towards 5G masts. This can be an issue for local politicians who must balance local concerns with a desire for improved mobile connectivity and the social and economic benefits it can help deliver.

*"The use case for 5G is yet to be proven. 4G everywhere with consistent quality would be more useful currently",*

"5G isn't seen as needed for local economic development yet, some will use it but most are happy as long as they get good 4G service".

"We're more focussed on not letting those communities already poorly served by 4G fall further behind rather than getting 5G to those who already have good connectivity".

"Health concerns and the visual impact of 5G (monopole) masts are leading to lots of issues and objections".
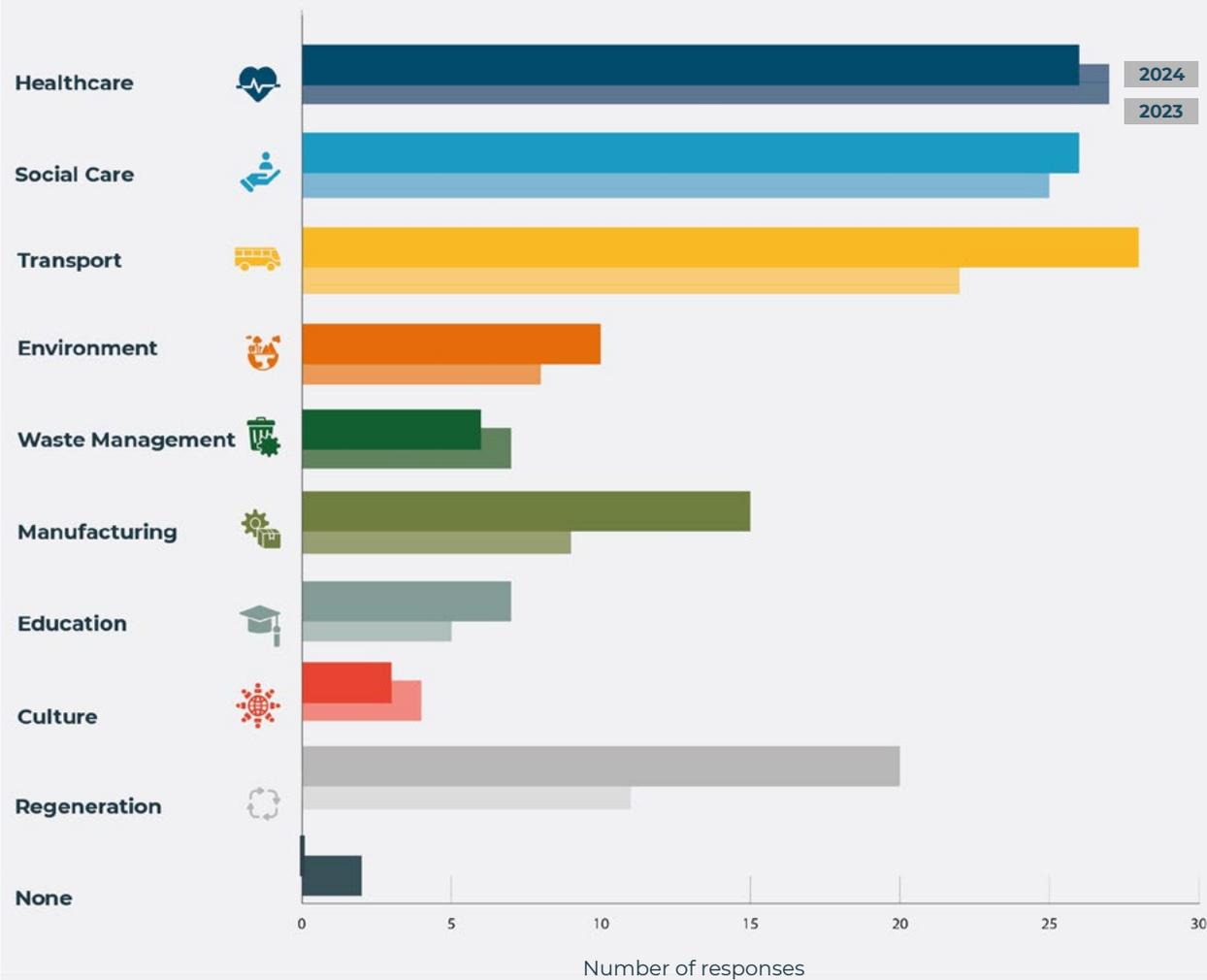
"People are still scared by 5G, which leads to planning objections and concerns from local politicians who are rightly representing their constituents".
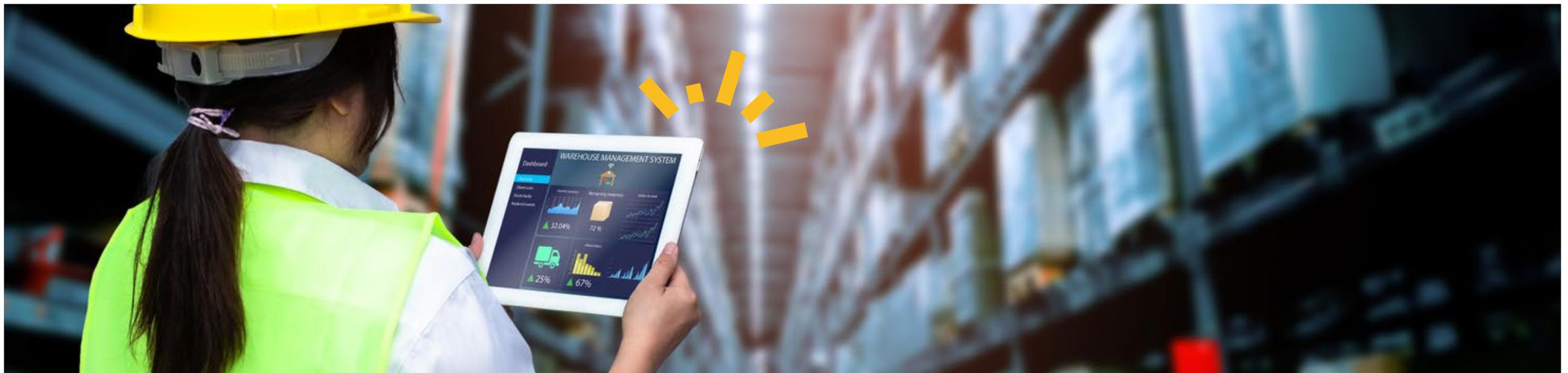
Q.15 WHICH SECTORS/SERVICE AREAS DO YOU THINK WILL BENEFIT MOST FROM 5G IN YOUR LOCAL AUTHORITY?

Bar chart comparing 2024 and 2023 responses by sector:

- Healthcare
- Social Care
- Transport
- Environment
- Waste Management
- Manufacturing
- Education
- Culture
- Regeneration
- None

X-axis: Number of responses (0 to 30)

This year's response shows transport overtaking both healthcare and social care as the sector/service area that is expected to benefit most from 5G connectivity. Both manufacturing and regeneration have also seen notable rises in the rankings, with less notable changes across the other areas.

As more evidence emerges as to how 5G can bring additional benefits, for example as a result of the current 5G Innovation Regions projects (5GIR), we may see more focus on supporting 5G deployment in future years.
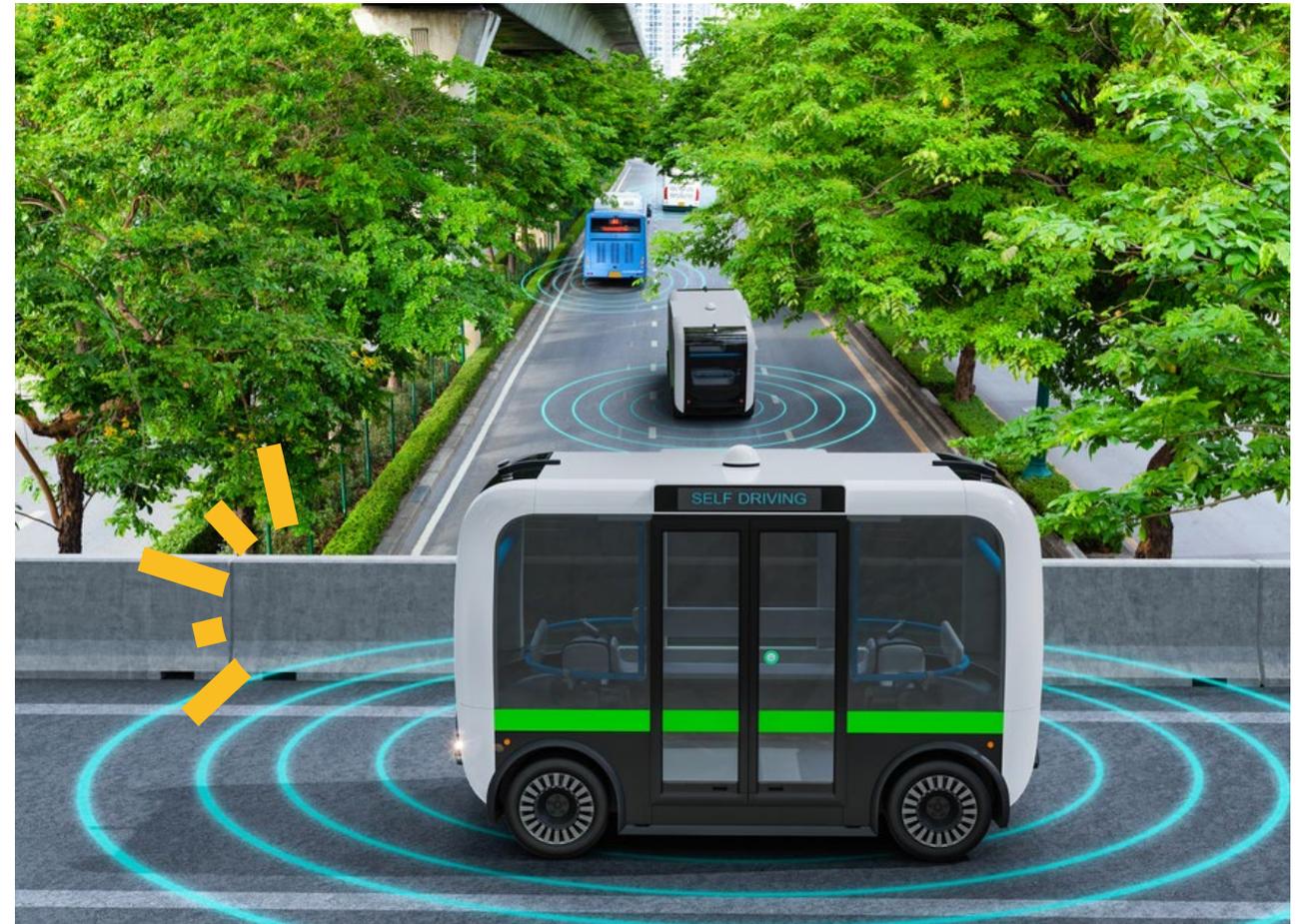
Smart Places

Smart Places

Smart Places is the term used to describe a town, a city, a village or even a community that is using data and emerging technology like IoT (Internet of Things) to address various local challenges such as minimising waste, optimising energy usage or reducing congestion.

The concept of Smart Cities is well established, with many successful examples of cities globally and within the UK using intelligent technology to enhance the quality of life in urban environments. This is made possible by combining existing datasets with new data captured by IoT devices, allowing nearly all elements of the urban landscape - including transit networks, energy grids, lighting systems and parking monitors – to wirelessly broadcast their state and activity in real-time. This enables dynamic monitoring of the place, helping to predict issues before they occur and optimising the delivery of resources or services to match demand.

Whilst 45% of respondents told us that they understood the benefits of smart places and had already deployed some smart technologies in their area, slightly up on last year's 43%, over half of respondents (55%) are yet to deploy any smart technologies.

Notably, there was a reduction in the number of respondents who told us they understood the benefits but had not yet deployed smart technologies, but were still planning to (down from 29% last year to 25% this year). There was an increase in those who thought it could be interesting but were yet to understand the benefits before initiating any projects (up from 17% to 26%).

Feedback suggests that more work is needed to fully understand the business case for investment in smart technologies and to ensure that the right solutions are selected to deal with local challenges. We have seen evidence that suggests there are more deployments than the survey responses might suggest, either within specific departments, or where solutions aren't always considered as "smart" such as telecare devices, EV charging infrastructure and other examples.

This suggests that there is a misconception that 'smart' means deploying IoT or sensors alone, rather than making better use of data or systems already in place, or leveraging digital connectivity to improve service delivery or outcomes.

"Highways teams seem to be getting more onboard with deploying smart technologies, partly driven by things like integrated transport plans".

"We're looking for smart solutions that are scalable and have a clear business case, not spot-projects".

"We're fortunate to have good connectivity coverage now, so we're now focussing on smart places projects that can look to make best use of it".

Taking time to look at the use cases and understanding what a 'smart' solution will provide allows the right processes to be designed to realise the desired benefits. There is little point in collecting 'smart' data if the resulting information isn't used to make decisions, improve how services are targeted, and react to events. We wanted to understand what sector use cases were seen as being the most beneficial.

Whilst this year's rankings are very similar to last year, with social care followed by the environment still seen as the leading sectors, there is a notable increase in those who felt that waste management was also likely to benefit. This increase could be a result of waste management being more widely deployed and understood as a solution, alongside its replicability in different Local Authority areas.
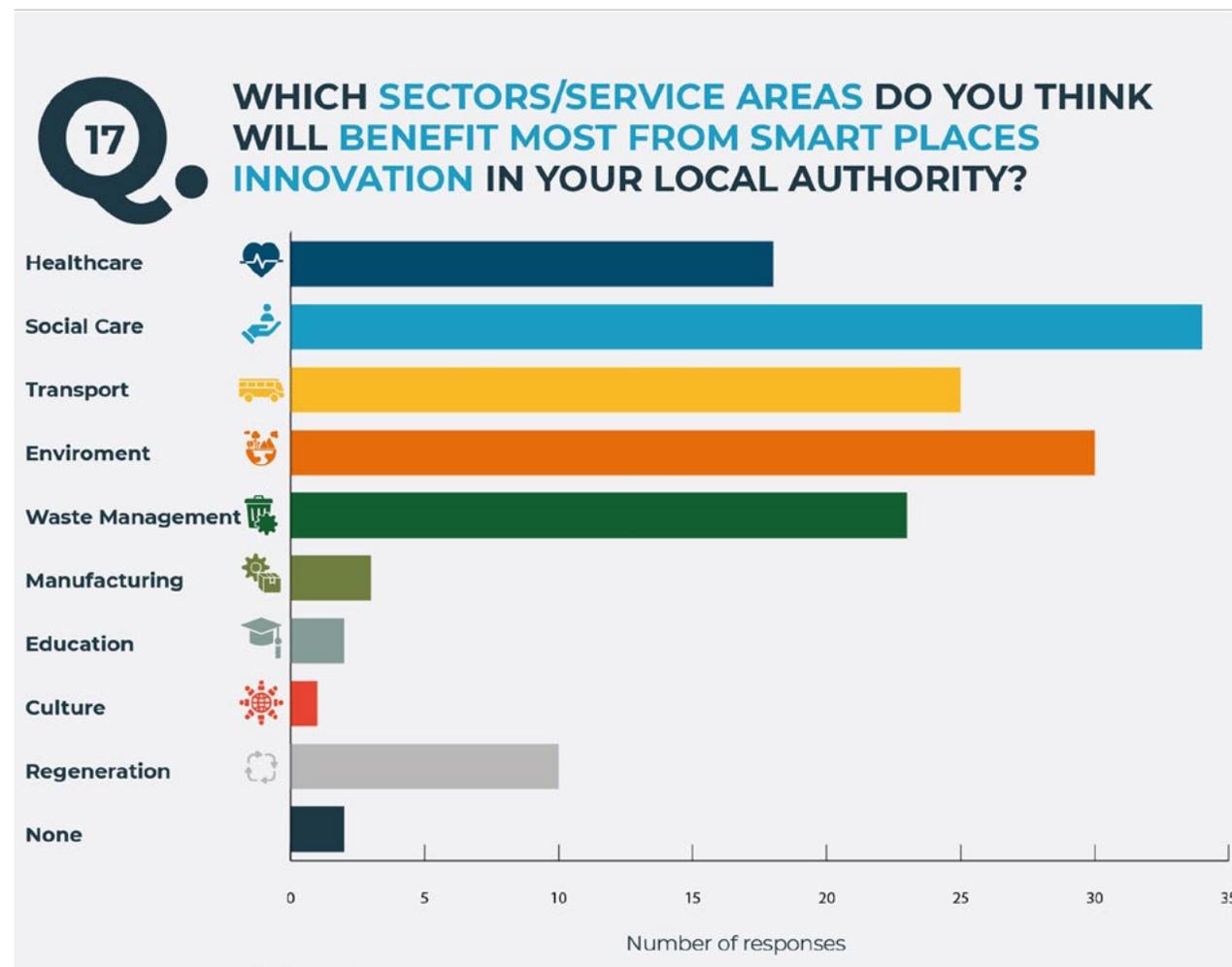
It is no surprise to see social care lead the rankings, as most Local Authorities provide telecare services with a significant budget and so is an obvious area for increased efficiency and/or service improvements. This is also likely to be affected by the Digital Switchover which has meant that existing devices and systems often require to be replaced with 'smarter' solutions, something we expect to continue and accelerate over the next year as the 2025 deadline approaches.

There may also be a similar increase in the deployment of smart technologies in response to the 2G/3G switch-off, with Local Authorities required to consider how they replace legacy systems which will no longer operate with suitable alternatives. This may be the opportunity for service review and the potential use of smart technologies.

WHICH SECTORS/SERVICE AREAS DO YOU THINK WILL BENEFIT MOST FROM SMART PLACES INNOVATION IN YOUR LOCAL AUTHORITY?

Q.17

BLOG: SMART TECHNOLOGY COULD BE THE ANSWER TO OUR SOCIAL CARE PROBLEMS

Read our article to find out more:
farrpoint.com/news/smart-social-care

Service Switch-Offs

Service Switch-Offs

A number of widely used connectivity services are being switched off over the coming years as replacement technology delivers improved, more reliable solutions, and operators look to reduce their operating costs by decommissioning legacy infrastructure. We wanted to know if organisations knew about these plans and if they were well prepared or already starting to implement any required changes.

Our conversations with Local Authorities suggest that as they start implementing their switchover plans, often other impacted services are discovered which also need action. This is likely to continue as more Local Authorities make further progress over the coming year.
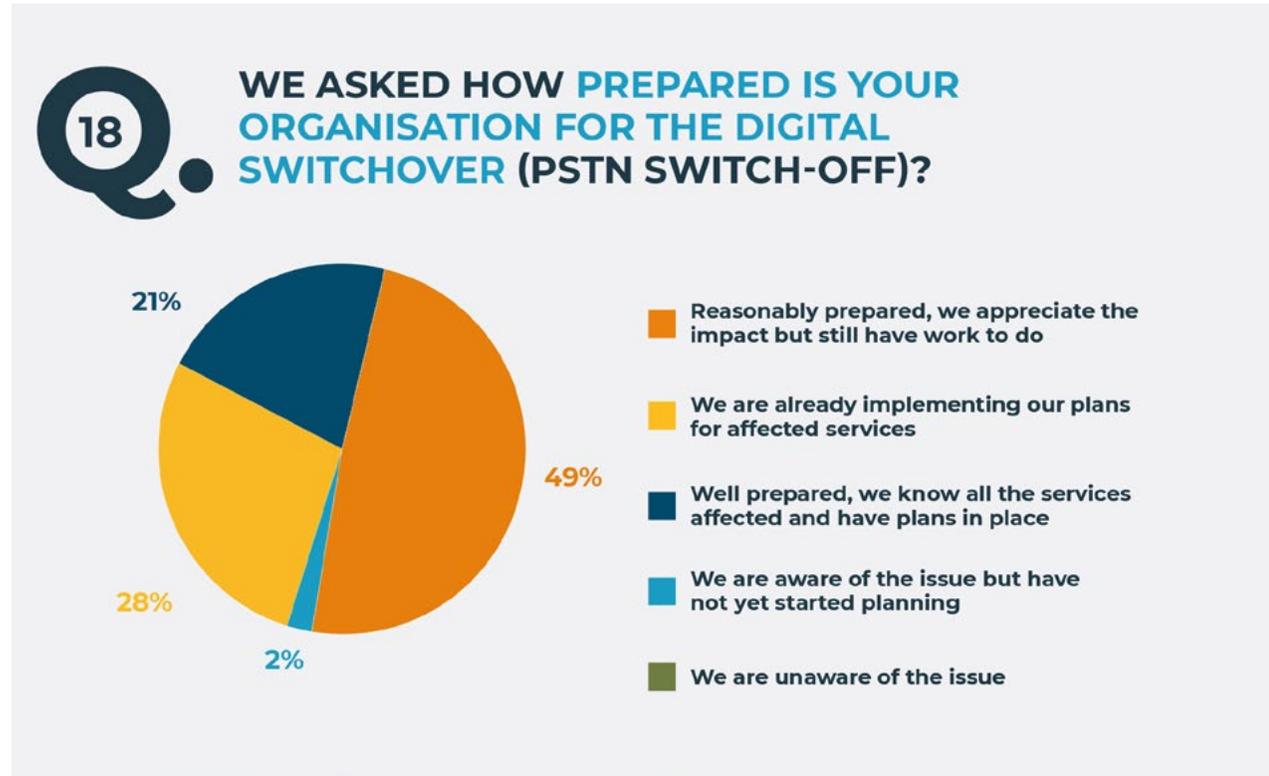
As expected, this year's responses showed a marked shift in terms of activity surrounding the digital switchover (PSTN switch-off), with 28% of respondents now in the process of implementing plans for affected services. There was a significant increase in those either well prepared and their organisation knows all the services affected and have plans in place (21%), or are reasonably prepared and appreciate the impact but still have work to do (49%). Only 2% of respondents said that they were aware of the issue but had not yet started planning for the digital switchover.

Similar to the results for the digital switchover, significant progress appears around the copper switch-off, also known as the migration from copper to fibre broadband. A significant number of respondents stated that their organisation is already implementing their plans for impacted services. The vast majority of others are either well prepared, and their organisation knows all the services affected and have plans in place (18%) or are reasonably prepared and appreciate the impact but still have work to do (51%). Only 2% of respondents said that they were aware of the issue but had not yet started planning for the copper switch-off.

This is encouraging as the copper switch-off is unlikely to have a significant impact on services for some time to come, and this early activity is a result of work required to deal with the more time-critical digital switchover.

Some concerns remain however that there is still confusion regarding the analogue and copper switch-offs meaning these responses may not accurately reflect the level of preparedness in Local Authorities.

some have made less progress in further developing their plans or turning these into activities.

Mirroring the responses regarding the other switch-offs, only 2% of respondents said that they were unaware of the issue regarding the 2G/3G switch-off.

Whilst it is reassuring to see that progress is being made, the fact that the 3G switch-off is already underway, those yet to start implementing their plans for affected services need to make rapid progress if they are to avoid any resulting impact.

Based on feedback throughout the year we were also keen to understand if there had been any budgetary impact within local authorities as a result of the switch-offs.

Q20. HOW WELL PREPARED IS YOUR ORGANISATION FOR THE 2G AND 3G SWITCH-OFF?

	2023	2024	Change	Label
	50%	42%	↓ 8%	Reasonably prepared, we appreciate the impact but still have work to do
	14%	21%	↑ 7%	Well prepared, we know all the services affected and have plans in place
	29%	21%	↓ 8%	We are aware of the issue but have not yet started planning have a strategy
	0%	13%	↑ 15%	We are already implementing our plans for affected services
	7%	2%	↓ 5%	We are unaware of the issue

Responses regarding the 2G/3G switch-off show that progress is being made from last year. Those who had plans in place last year have now progressed to implement their plans for affected services. Interestingly, the number of respondents who said they were reasonably prepared and appreciate the impact but still have work to do, or who are aware of the issue but have not yet started planning, have both dropped by 8%. Whilst this could be as a result of some progressing to being 'well prepared' or 'already implementing plans' it also suggests

Q21. WE ASKED LOCAL AUTHORITIES IF THERE HAVE BEEN ANY BUDGETARY PRESSURES AS A RESULT OF THE SWITCH-OFFS?

10% We have fully identified all associated costs and had already budgeted for these	**22%** We have identified all associated costs and need to increase budgets to accommodate this
34% We have not yet identified all associated costs but have budget allocated to this	**34%** We have no budget allocated to dealing with any resulting changes to affected services

Perhaps unsurprisingly the need for Local Authorities to reconfigure, update or replace existing connectivity and/or equipment as a result of the switch-offs will in many cases carry with it a cost. Whilst none of the switch-offs should come as a complete surprise, this has not necessarily translated into the required budget being allocated for any required changes.

This is reflected in the survey responses, which show that only 10% of respondents told us that their organisation had fully identified all associated costs and had already budgeted for these. Most (56%) stated they have either already identified all associated costs and need to increase budgets or haven't yet identified all associated costs but do have some budget allocated to this. Alarmingly, the remaining 34% have no budget allocated to dealing with any resulting changes to affected services, meaning the funds will have to be found from somewhere if services are to be maintained.

Clearly with services such as telecare, alarms, lift lines and traffic signals potentially being impacted, budget will need to be found, especially for those services where there is a statutory requirement.

> *"We've got a comms officer specifically focussed on external messaging about the switch-offs to try and increase awareness and provide a trusted voice".*

THE TRIO OF THE UK TELECOMS SWITCH-OFFS: A USEFUL GUIDE

Download the guide:
farrpoint.com/news/Switch-offs-guide-launch

View interactive Digital Switchover Maps for Virgin Media 02 and Openreach: **farrpoint.com/connectivity-changes-map/**
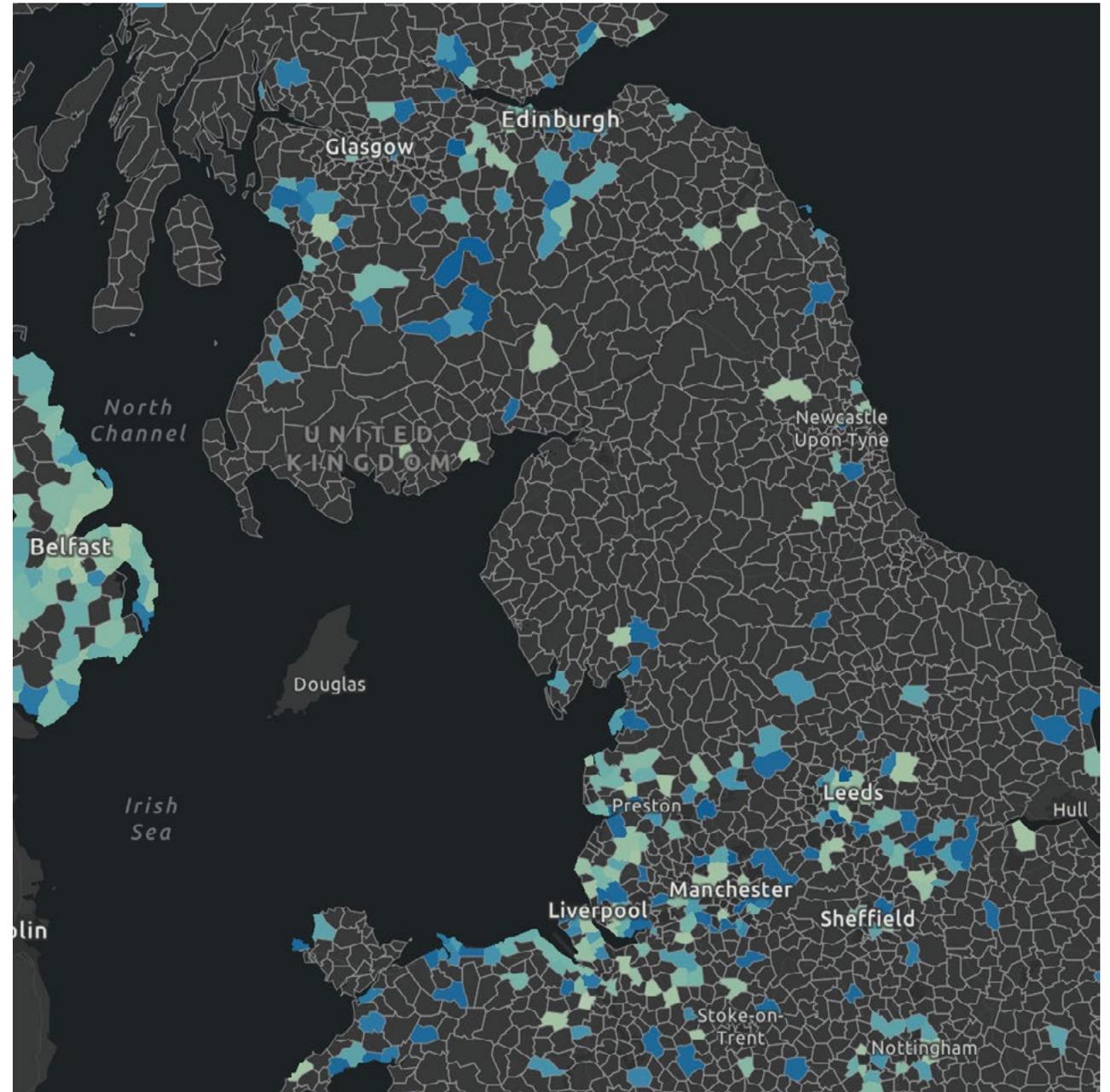
Connectivity and Reducing Emissions

Connectivity and Reducing Emissions

The role of connectivity in the drive to net-zero emissions can often be overlooked and yet the change in lifestyle and business operations that will be key to achieving these goals are underpinned by good connectivity. We wanted to understand how this concept was regarded by the local authorities.

These results align with the low priority of ensuring digital connectivity is aligned with net-zero targets within the digital strategy priorities for 2024.

WHAT ROLE DOES SUSTAINABILITY OF RESOURCES AND REDUCTION IN EMISSIONS PLAY IN YOUR DIGITAL STRATEGY?

Q.22

19%
18%
↓ 1%
Very important, we have defined net-zero targets and understand how digital connectivity influences our drive to net zero

62%
57%
↓ 5%
We understand it will play a role, but we have not calculated how digital connectivity influences our drive to net zero

17%
19%
↑ 2%
We know this will be important, but we don't know how / need more guidance

2%
6%
↑ 4%
Not important to the digital department and it's something that other departments will look after

Whilst the overall results haven't changed significantly since last year, there was a slight reduction in those who understand digital connectivity will play a role but have not calculated how this influences the drive to net zero. There was also an increase in those who said that net zero is not important to those responsible for digital connectivity as it's something that other departments will look after.

"*We have a dedicated net zero team within the council, however their focus is yet to include the impact of digital connectivity in achieving these targets*".

"*We know there is a potential net zero benefit as a result of digital connectivity, but we don't know how to quantify it*".

"*Every employee has how they will contribute to achieving Net Zero included in their personal development targets*".

About FarrPoint

FarrPoint is a connectivity and smart technology consultancy with operations in the UK, US and Canada.

At FarrPoint, we understand the importance of connectivity, as it drives business and society, bringing communities and commerce together. That's why we use our insight and experience to connect people and companies, anywhere in the world.

OUR SERVICES

Our team of consultants advise public and private sector organisations on the strategy, procurement and implementation of digital technology and connectivity infrastructure.

AREAS OF EXPERTISE

We specialise in a wide range of areas, including Broadband Connectivity, 5G, Enterprise IT & Networks, Net-Zero, Smart Places, Health & Social Care, GiS and Economic Analysis.

The approach that makes us go further:

| PRAGMATISM | EMPATHY | DUTY OF CARE |

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