

# The Digital Connectivity Infrastructure Accelerator (DCIA) Dissemination Event: Cross Government Panel

Offering a rare opportunity to pull together representatives from different departments, agencies and teams, Nick Wiggin hosted a cross-government panel at the recent DCIA dissemination event. He was joined on stage by Matthew Eglinton, DFT, Rowena Clift-Shanley, BDUK, Jesam Eyong from the Barrier Busting team in DCMS, and Amit Slaich, NUAR, for a discussion that explored the work of all panellists and how they intersected and can help inform the DCIA programme.

To begin, Wiggin posed an open question to all panellists: how will the work you do impact local authorities and combine with DCIA for mutual benefit?

Eyong kicked things off, identifying that the barrier busting team and DCIA “are natural cousins”. As part of the policy team designed to remove barriers to roll out, across his role he works with legal teams, planning, property, highways and many more teams across local authorities, through conversations and ad hoc sessions through to more formal webinars and training sessions on topics such as 5G safety and the Electronic Communications Code. “A natural collaboration has sprung up through this programme, we want to see this continue for years to come” he said “we work extensively with the Early Adopter Group because that’s the sweet spot for people who know connectivity is important but don’t necessarily have all the answers about how to do it or where to start”.

Clift-Shanley, the local delivery lead for BDUK, an executive agency of DCMS, is focused on delivering Project Gigabit and achieving 85% connectivity across the UK by 2025. In achieving that work she works closely with industry and suppliers to understand their commercial aspirations, and to identify where the market won’t go due to commercial viability. A large part of BDUK’s remit therefore is to explore how to prioritise intervention - which can vary from voucher schemes for individual residents and businesses through to centralised procurements - to make sure that communities are not left behind. Through the programme about 5,000 local authority buildings have been connected. “It’s very much about how

we come together to deliver connectivity to all, irrespective of programme or technology” she said, adding that it has been great to see so much “human connectivity” across the event.

Eglinton was by his own admission “wearing multiple hats” on the panel, considering in his role at DfT how EVs, AVs and micro mobility link into connectivity needs. Having previously worked at CCAV in the regulatory environment, he has a clear understanding of how “digital connectivity is becoming more and more ingrained” and stated that having worked with Louise Lancaster’s team to secure the Shared Outcomes funding for the programme, DfT are “big supporters of DCIA”.

He explained how DfT is proactively picking up on DCMS’ digital strategy: “We are exploring what DfT’s transport data strategy looks like and building on what digital can do for us in transport and for DCIA as well”. As an example he referenced the successful trial between consultancy firms, National Highways and the DfT to establish a connected A2/M2 corridor where Wi-Fi enabled infrastructure was deployed on the highway. “That can obviously be scaled and rolled out across other vehicles, from freight to private vehicles and public transport”.

Eglinton spoke extensively about how the open data principles around DCIA and best practice sharing can be applied to a transport setting, giving as an example open data regulations around bus operators providing more detailed and better data around fares. “This can empower people to make more informed decisions about how to plan journeys around accessibility and cost” he said, emphasising how this provides people with flexibility and choice.

Several other examples were given of how the open data approach is driving DfT’s work, from running a consultation around adopting an open data approach to EV charging point usage to being able to map multiple networks: highways, EV charging points, power and water. “Having the ability to bring data together about the surface of a highway and what is underneath it will be so useful” he stated. “By sharing data it really means we understand how all these networks interact with each other and the critical junctures where they intersect”.

Slaich agreed, stating that “there’s not just an economic benefit to understanding these intersections but a human element too. We don’t want someone to get critically injured and so having this information is so vital for a number of reasons”. Slaich works on the NUAR - National Underground Assets Register, a three year programme being rolled out across England, Wales and Northern Ireland to create a digital map of underground pipes and cables in order to revolutionise the way buried infrastructure is installed, maintained, operated and repaired. Being nine months into the programme, they are a little further ahead in their journey

than DCIA and Wiggin was keen to understand what learnings they could incorporate into DCIA.

Slaich shared that the programme has an equivalent barrier busting approach: “we’re keen to keep communicating and collaborating with our asset owners and taking them on the journey with us. It’s really about understanding what your users want, seeing what else is being done across government that could support, for instance the Fibre in Water project we’re working with DCMS on, and seeing how you can take people with you”.

Conversation turned to the work that Eyong has undertaken with Central London Forward, a London based alliance. “We’ve facilitated discussions between MNOs and their planning departments, ensuring both sides understand the pressures they’re under from under-resourced teams to requirements of radio teams”. Mirroring sentiments from the MNO panel, Eyong reflected on “frank but positive conversations” and a hope that this can lead to more dialogue between both sides, resulting in more positive application approvals for masts. Core to this work is the idea of being able to replicate lessons learned elsewhere: “we have a great working relationship with the team there and we try to tackle problems together, and apply the learnings from a tricky area like London to other urban areas throughout the UK”.

Clift-Shanley shared that this barrier-busting approach is something BDUK has also adopted. “We’re trying to work at a local level to understand the challenges associated with rolling out in earnest, working with the likes of national parks so that when operators arrive in an area, there is already a how-to guide and toolkit available on how to approach that”.



A common theme across the discussion was not only consensus on a barrier-busting approach, but the value and importance of pre-emptively identifying challenges. Assets such as the Streetworks Toolkit is designed to train up key individuals in authorities, raise awareness of likely challenges that may occur and anticipate issues ahead of them being realised in real-time. In this way, Eyong explained, “we can make sure relationships are good and maintained before there are reasons that may otherwise have caused them to fall apart”.

Looking to the future, Wiggin asked the panellists what government should be thinking about for DCIA beyond 2023. Eglinton expressed a clear desire for continuation of communication and efforts between DCIA and DfT, especially with regards to bringing in CCAV and OZEV: “these things need to be embedded and interwaved so we can realise shared benefits. I’m very keen to continue to work with DCMS as much as possible” he said. With his team at DfT responsible for approximately 7.5m street columns, he identified that there is “a lot of data and a lot of understanding still to go”. He expressed interest in exploring how they could consider things such as maintaining road networks, for instance through winter with gritting and road repairs. “The venn diagram becomes closer and closer entwined with data and we need to look at where we can deliver shared outcomes” he concluded.

Clift-Shanley similarly identified significant scope for DCIA to continue to grow and evolve. She highlighted that a key issue right now is the capacity in the market to deliver aspirations stating that “the fund and aspiration is there but the

ability to deliver what is needed is difficult. We've talked about Digital Champions and that rollouts need to be faster, but we need the skills in the market as well". Asking who the workforce of the future are, she was keen to explore how we could think about getting young people to consider potential careers in, and provide diversity into, the telecoms workforce.

Summarising the sentiment of the panel and the day, Eyong concluded: "If DCIA continues to foster the relationships that are starting to build and strengthen – as evidenced by today – then I think it will be for the greater good".

In conclusion, Wiggin reflected on the positive sentiment across the event: "there has been a really good energy in the room for the outset, and we've had an opportunity to network extensively. That's what today is all about, enabling you to build those relationships, collaborate more, find new pieces of information and take them back to apply to your own digital connectivity strategy and plans".