

The Digital Connectivity Infrastructure Accelerator (DCIA) Dissemination Event: MNO Panel

At the recent DCIA Dissemination Event, Gareth Elliot, Mobile UK hosted a panel with representatives from all four of the UK's mobile network operators, testament to their commitment and willingness to forge successful partnerships with local authorities.

Before the panel started, a video was played introducing small cell and macro cell technology and the MNO infrastructure partners that are helping to roll this out nationwide.

Gareth Elliott then welcomed to the stage: Chris Jefferies from Vodafone, Pete Hollebon from Virgin Media O2, Ali Akhtar from BT / EE and William Comery from Three. All identified the last few years of rollout had been intensive but that to be part of this forum and to see the work being undertaken was heartening.

To kick things off, Elliott asked the panellists how they engaged with local authorities and if in fact, it was always the MNOs who undertook that engagement. The panel echoed some of the sentiments that had been shared by local authorities in the morning presentations, that identifying the correct people to talk to can be a tricky and drawn out process. Comery outlined that Three had proactively looked to reach out to council leaders, heads of planning, transport teams, social inclusion and development leads. Their approach has been to engage with as many different teams in an authority as possible, but all panellists agreed that digital champions in a local authority provide a key interface and make it far easier to engage, with Akhtar calling the role "phenomenally important". Comery seconded this, explaining that digital champions help to ensure MNOs "have a voice within the council". Elliott went on to lay out Mobile UK's five principles they are calling for in a digital champion stating that "where we see Digital Champions in a local authority, we tend to see far greater positivity". Those principles are:

1. That Digital Champions should be centrally funded, recognising the budgetary pressures local authorities are under
2. That these should be senior positions – they need to be cross cutting, engaging at director level and political level and have clearly defined responsibilities
3. They need to have political support by a councillor who is responsible for digital strategy, policy and the Digital Champion role
4. They need to have the correct experience: the role demands capabilities across a number of disciplines but first and foremost is the ability to talk and engage with the telecoms industry
5. They should be outcome rather than output focused – this is about working on many streams to get things going, overcoming barriers, and simplifying processes.

There was a sense from the panel that Digital Champions not only help the MNOs to access and navigate a local authority but that they also enable the MNOs to know exactly what is expected of them and how they can work together with places to achieve their goals. This sense of partnership was clear throughout the panel, alongside a recognition that engagement with local authorities has perhaps not always been approached in a positive way, with one panellist accepting that “we’ve learned through DCMS stakeholder sessions and programmes like the DCIA, and we’re now engaging in a more realistic way. We as a business need to grow but we are learning how councils operate, with resource restrictions, cost restrictions, and we’re now working to do much better”. Colleban said, “collaboration is the key here and we recognise that. We have to work with you, ultimately what we want to deliver is advance the capacity and coverage for your residents and our network but it has to be a two-way thing”.

In that vein, a member of the audience asked if in places where councils are putting up Digital Champions, MNOs would reciprocate by providing a single point of contact into their business. Elliott acknowledged that this was a fair point and something Mobile UK was looking at.

Another question from the floor asked for more senior engagement by the MNOs, stating that “if you were a company that was about to invest in an area, you would probably at a CEO level seek a meeting with the council and talk about the value you’re going to bring. Taking a similar approach, even if it is just about infill, may help to smooth the way”. It was also suggested this approach might be particularly helpful in authorities that don’t yet have Digital Champions. This was well received by the panel, who identified that they are doing a lot of work with DCMS about how they engage with council leadership and about ensuring they have the data available to be able to demonstrate the investment they are putting into an area.

Jefferies called out the fact that the work being done by the DCIA pilots should deliver significant value to the MNOs: “we’re all busy people so having the easier route with the ability to quickly look at a database and look at council buildings, see other council sites, see boilerplate agreements etc in place is amazing. Then if we can replicate that across the country, we can advance in the race to 5G.”

Discussion then turned to how we can win the hearts and minds of people within local authorities and communities as a whole, helping to raise understanding of exactly what infrastructure needs to be deployed, and why densification of networks is needed, with reference to IoT and in the future, connected autonomous vehicles. Discussion then turned to the infrastructure itself, with an open discussion around some of the challenges MNOs face when they put in an application, with common questions including “can you not put in a small cell rather than a macro cell?” and “why does it need to go here, can’t you put it down the road?”

Jefferies outlined the challenges that they face in terms of needing to not only build relationships with local authorities and find appropriate places, but also to satisfy the needs of their radio teams. He acknowledged that sometimes they need to walk away from sites if they are simply not right for the network. Discussion about the role and merits of macro and small cells focused around the fact these are complementary and that they need to work together: “ten small cells can’t replace one macro cell”, instead they will provide an additional layer of capacity for end user benefits.



There was acknowledgement that there have been “a number of false dawns” with small cells and that they are an emerging technology but it was clear they will play

an increasing role as networks evolve and grow in response to increased demand. Holleban explained, “the macro cell is the big site providing the wide ranging coverage and capacity. Small cell is a location solution designed to benefit the customer. Typically it is a shoebox size on a lighting column and by bringing that closer to the end user, it delivers a much better performance to the end customer. We need lower radio powered solutions to cope with high density of demand i.e.at the entrance to a tube station. Small cells are definitely complementary with the existing ecosystem of networks”.

Akhtar concurred, concluding that “5G unilateral small cells will, longer term, provide your 5G coverage via street columns etc, while 4G masts will be on rooftops. Small cells will be the solution in dense urban areas where aesthetics and size are key”.

In their closing remarks, the panel reflected on the progress that has been made in building relationships between local authorities and the MNOs, and the opportunity to strengthen those relationships even further. “We’ve started to see from local authorities an increasing understanding of the benefit connectivity brings, and the economic good it brings to the whole community” said Elliott. Akhthar perhaps stated it best however: “for our industry it’s key for us to understand the drivers and ambitions of local authorities. Then we can look at what we need to do to help authorities achieve those goals”.

Holleban left attendees with a clear call to arms recognising that “the discussion and collaboration we’ve had today has been fantastic. I encourage all of you, either formally through channels such as the Early Adopter Group, or through informal discussion with colleagues across the country, to emphasise the work we’re collectively doing and support this message of partnership. We want to do business with you guys, it’s as simple as that.”