

# MOBILE ACTION PLAN

for Northern Ireland  
(MAP NI)

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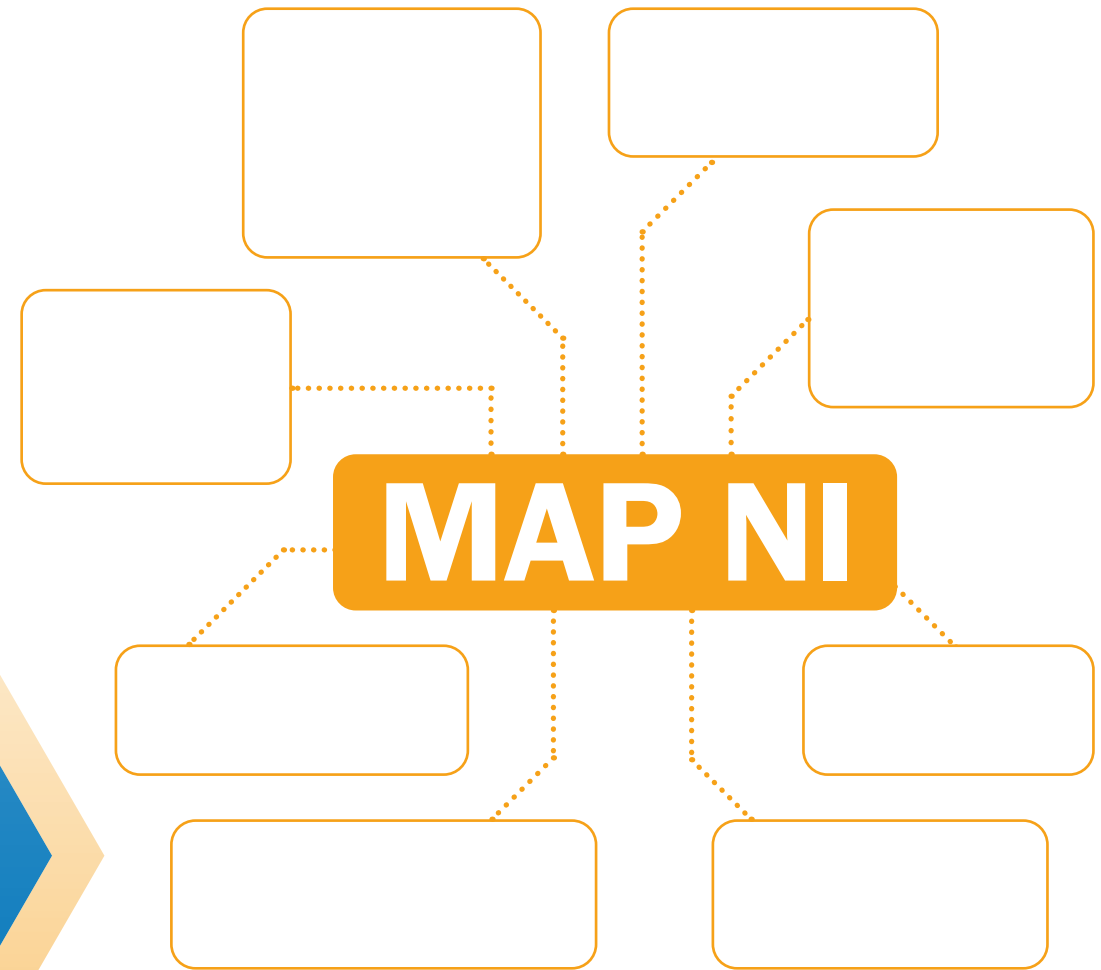
# MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

Although telecommunication legislation in the United Kingdom is a reserved matter, it is important that we here in Northern Ireland recognise the growing importance of mobile technologies and create the right environment to encourage further investment in the rollout of mobile infrastructure. This plan has identified the key issues that impact the roll out of mobile technologies and has provided solutions to help address them.

Due to our unique circumstances in Northern Ireland, no one Department has overall responsibility for mobile / digital roll out. Numerous government bodies (both central and local) and other key stakeholders have played key roles in the development of this plan and will again as the actions identified are implemented. I would like to thank them all for their collaborative approach and for the commitment they have shown to work together in the future to facilitate the roll out of mobile technologies.

For the first time in Northern Ireland, this plan provides a platform for central and local government to work together with the mobile industry and the regulator, strengthening relationships and improving processes, to provide connectivity to meet the current and future needs of business and citizens. It will help to create the right conditions for improved mobile coverage and support investment to realise the Northern Ireland Executive's digital ambitions.

**Gordon Lyons**  
Minister for the Economy



With support from



Department for  
Digital, Culture,  
Media & Sport

# INTRODUCTION

**Access to high quality digital connectivity is a priority for the Northern Ireland Executive, along with wider society, and will play a major role in re-building the Northern Ireland economy as we emerge from the Covid-19 crisis.**

Affordable and secure digital infrastructure is essential to citizens and businesses. The availability and exchange of information afforded by telecommunications ensures citizens and businesses are connected to communities and the wider world and are essential for long term prosperity. Modern society demands reliable and fast communication networks to drive economic activity, to allow citizens to keep in touch, access public services and participate in modern society.

Although connectivity in Northern Ireland continues to improve, as existing networks are being upgraded and new fixed infrastructure is being built, further progress can be made by seeking to remove identified barriers. As a key commitment in the Department for the Economy's Covid-19 Response Business Plan, the Minister for the Economy gave approval to establish a cross sectoral working group to develop a Mobile Action Plan for Northern Ireland.

The Group, which brought together stakeholders from industry, central and local government, through consultation with stakeholders, identified issues faced by Mobile Network Operators in the roll out of mobile networks and sought to establish solutions to enable better, faster and more consistent mobile coverage throughout Northern Ireland.



The MAP NI working group found that one or more stakeholders that they engaged with found the existence of barriers within the following 5 themes:

## **1. PERCEPTION OF MOBILE TECHNOLOGY**

## **2. PLANNING**

## **3. COSTS**

## **4. PUBLIC ASSET AVAILABILITY**

## **5. KEEPING PACE**



# PERCEPTION OF MOBILE TECHNOLOGY

## BARRIER:

The commercial roll out of Mobile technology has been hampered by lack of acceptance and the public perception of alleged health and security concerns. This has led to resistance to the installation of mobile infrastructure and in recent times has resulted in damage to newly installed 5G infrastructure fuelled by campaigns to disrupt and halt progress. Despite the publication of information, e.g. [a 5g Technology Guide](#) and [Which? produced 5G technology dangers: Your questions answered](#) designed to bust myths and increase understanding, public perception remains a barrier to progress.

It is vitally important that accurate, factual and evidence based information is made readily available to relevant policy / decision makers and to members of the public to help allay any concerns and dispel any misinformation that is being widely circulated.

Communication of the advantages, opportunities and benefits to the Northern Ireland economy, particularly for businesses and organisations, will enable the harnessing of new and emerging mobile technologies.

Addressing this issue is a key component to the success of the Mobile Action Plan for Northern Ireland and is high on the list of priorities when implementing the planned actions, failure to do so may inhibit the delivery of all other actions.

## ACTION 1

**The Department for the Economy will lead on delivering a programme of information, in conjunction with industry, to help inform citizens, address any perceived threats regarding new mobile technologies and outline the advantages, opportunities and benefits to the Northern Ireland economy.**



# PLANNING

## BARRIER:

Steps have been taken to update and streamline the process for Mobile Network Operators to navigate the planning system in an efficient and effective manner whilst keeping the environmental and amenity impact of new infrastructure to a minimum. Telecommunication and digital technology are constantly evolving and it is crucial that supporting systems and processes are both resilient and reactive to changing needs while complying with policy, legislation, regulations and guidance. In Northern Ireland the Department for Infrastructure holds the regional policy pen for planning while councils are responsible for local policy and determine most planning applications. Closer working will help foster understanding of both industry and government needs and planners making decisions on telecommunication planning applications may benefit from additional information to better understand the constantly evolving industry of telecommunication and digital technology. Availing of learning and best practice will ensure that Northern Ireland continues to support innovation.

## ACTION 2

**The Department for Infrastructure will continue to monitor legislative changes in other jurisdictions and look at ways to ensure the planning system supports better digital connectivity and the economic and societal benefits this brings, balanced with the need to keep environmental and amenity impacts to a minimum. Councils will also have a key role to play and should bring forward policies and proposals within their Local Development Plans that**

**address important planning considerations for new telecommunication infrastructure. To assist in that process, the industry is encouraged to proactively engage with councils during preparation of Local Development Plans in relation to market and technological considerations and impact mitigations.**

## ACTION 3

**The Department for the Economy and the Northern Ireland Local Government Association will consider ways to enhance council and planners' understanding of telecommunication and digital technology. e.g. through an awareness raising programme for elected members and officers, along with the sharing of best practice from other jurisdictions.**

## ACTION 4

**In line with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport's recommendations, Northern Ireland Councils will investigate the benefits and feasibility of appointing 'Digital Champions' who could act as a single point of contact for mobile network operators and infrastructure providers, businesses and residents and co-ordinate activities within the council regarding telecommunications infrastructure. Councils will gather evidence and best practice on the use of digital champions in other jurisdictions, and their effectiveness in aiding the roll out of digital connectivity. Councils will also work with relevant Northern Ireland Government Departments on these ambitions.**

## ACTION 5

**The Department for the Economy will assist local government in their consideration of producing a 'best practice guide' on mobile network development which would be developed in collaboration with industry and relevant government bodies.**





# COSTS

## BARRIER:

Industry has indicated that prohibitively high infrastructure costs and limited revenues that can be generated, particularly in rural areas where there are relatively few users, reduces commercial viability and impedes progress to the fast and efficient deployment of mobile technologies.

## FINDING:

The group investigated potential solutions and in particular the possibility of non-domestic rates relief for masts. Due to the ongoing delivery of other interventions at this point in time such as the **Shared Rural Network (srn.org.uk)**, proposed changes to the **Electronic Communications Code** and the learning from the other Devolved Administrations it is not proposed to change how rates are assessed (by Land & Property Services Valuation), or collected (by Land & Property Services Revenue & Benefits) as there is currently no evidence to support any argument.





# PUBLIC ASSET AVAILABILITY

## BARRIER:

Mobile Network Operators have highlighted difficulties experienced in gaining access to suitable sites to host telecommunication infrastructure therefore closer working with public sector asset owners and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport to develop plans for potential public sector asset use would be beneficial. Improved access to Public Sector Assets could benefit the mobile industry but currently negotiating access across the public sector can be a lengthy and disparate process.

## ACTION 6

**Northern Ireland Councils and all relevant Departments should engage with Mobile Network Operators and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport to consider developing plans which may enable the use of publicly owned assets to be considered for the roll out of telecommunication infrastructure.**



# KEEPING PACE

## **BARRIER:**

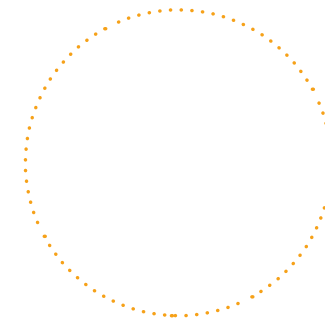
Given the rapid pace of technological advances in the industry, it is crucial that ongoing review and cross sector cooperation, coupled with political support, maintain momentum and progress into the future. The Mobile Action Plan for Northern Ireland will aid much needed progress in identifying barriers to investment in telecommunication infrastructure and recommending solutions but a long term approach must be established across government to keep pace. Councils can play their part by including policies relating to mobile telecommunication infrastructure in their Local Development Plans and the establishment of a Barrier Busting Taskforce for Northern Ireland could ensure dedicated resources are available to maintain progress into the future.

## **ACTION 7**

**Consideration should be given to the establishment of a Northern Ireland Barrier Busting Taskforce in association with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and industry to identify and address the barriers preventing the fast and efficient deployment of mobile connectivity in Northern Ireland. All relevant Departments / Councils should be represented.**

## **ACTION 8**

**Northern Ireland Councils should ensure that Local Development Plans take account of the changing nature of mobile telecoms solutions and ensure policies are future-proofed and regularly reviewed in line with mobile telecoms industry developments.**



# NEXT STEPS

**This Plan sets out a pragmatic programme of work across government and other stakeholders to support the effective and efficient rollout of mobile technologies across Northern Ireland.**

The partnership approach across government departments, councils, industry and stakeholders to develop this plan provides a solid foundation to build upon established relationships to help progress Northern Ireland's digital ambitions.

The Northern Ireland component of the Shared Rural Network Programme focuses on closing partial not-spots which remain problematic. The Shared Rural Network outlines clear targets for 4G coverage in Northern Ireland from all four operators to rise to a minimum of 85%, up from 79% in 2020, and specifically coverage from at least one operator to increase to 98%, up from 97%, as a result of the programme. The Partial Not-Spot programme is the first element of the programme to be delivered with outcomes guaranteed to be delivered by June 2024 therefore the timing of any policy changes that could help Mobile Network Operators to deliver these commitments, and other telecoms infrastructure is key and time sensitive. Target dates for the delivery of actions are included in **Annex A**.

The Mobile Action Plan must also consider and help to provide the necessary government led machinery to aid the roll out of all other mobile technologies (e.g. 5G, 6G, etc.) and therefore will be kept under timely review to assess ongoing relevance and to facilitate new technologies as they are being brought to market.



# NEXT STEPS



# TABLE OF ACTIONS & TARGET DATES

## ANNEX A

No	ACTIONS	OWNING AUTHORITIES	TARGET DATE
1	The Department for the Economy will lead on delivering a programme of information, in conjunction with industry, to help inform citizens, address any perceived threats regarding new mobile technologies and outline the advantages, opportunities and benefits to the Northern Ireland economy.	DfE	December 2022
2	The Department for Infrastructure will continue to monitor legislative changes in other jurisdictions and look at ways to ensure the planning system supports better digital connectivity and the economic and societal benefits this brings, balanced with the need to keep environmental and amenity impacts to a minimum. Councils will also have a key role to play and should bring forward policies and proposals within their Local Development Plans that address important planning considerations for new telecommunication infrastructure. To assist in that process, the industry is encouraged to proactively engage with councils during preparation of Local Development Plans in relation to market and technological considerations and impact mitigations.	DfI	Ongoing & regularly reviewed
3	The Department for the Economy and the Northern Ireland Local Government Association will consider ways to enhance council and planners' understanding of telecommunication and digital technology, e.g. through an awareness raising programme for elected members and officers, along with the sharing of best practice from other jurisdictions.	NILGA & DfE	November 2022
4	In line with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport's recommendations, Northern Ireland Councils will investigate the benefits and feasibility of appointing 'Digital Champions' who could act as a single point of contact for mobile network operators and infrastructure providers, businesses and residents and co-ordinate activities within the council regarding telecommunications infrastructure. Councils will gather evidence and best practice on the use of digital champions in other jurisdictions, and their effectiveness in aiding the roll out of digital connectivity. Councils will also work with relevant Northern Ireland Government Departments on these ambitions.	NILGA	January 2023
5	The Department for the Economy will assist local government in their consideration of producing a 'best practice guide' on mobile network development which would be developed in collaboration with industry and relevant government bodies.	NILGA and DfE	August 2022
6	Northern Ireland Councils and all relevant Departments should engage with Mobile Network Operators and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport to consider developing plans which may enable the use of publicly owned assets to be considered for the roll out of telecommunication infrastructure.	NI Councils & All relevant Departments	Commence July 2022
7	Consideration should be given to the establishment of a Northern Ireland Barrier Busting Taskforce in association with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and industry to identify and address the barriers preventing the fast and efficient deployment of mobile connectivity in Northern Ireland. All relevant Departments / Councils should be represented.	All relevant Departments/ Councils	Target first meeting December 2022
8	Northern Ireland Councils should ensure that Local Development Plans take account of the changing nature of mobile telecoms solutions and ensure policies are future-proofed and regularly reviewed in line with mobile telecoms industry developments.	NI Councils	Commence July 2022