Devolution and digital connectivity
Mission 6

Devolution can significantly improve the deployment and use of digital connectivity by enabling strategic authorities to allocate resources for digital skills, strengthen partnerships and set a clear direction for digital rollout.

However, studies indicating that 7.5 million to 8.5 million UK adults lack even basic digital skills reveal a significant challenge. With up to 11 million people lacking full digital capability, the economy is unable to fully benefit from digital technology.

A substantial rural-urban digital divide also remains, holding back rural economic growth and social inclusion. Without a clear regional strategy, progress is limited, while weak partnership working and collaboration leave little overall direction.

KEY ASKS

1. There are already a number of local partnerships between rural business, banks and academia to focus on and improve digital skills provision. This needs to be extended to all strategic authorities;
2. The lack of collaboration between strategic authorities as well as unitary authorities means that opportunities will continue to be lost. Co-ordination is required to ensure a strategic direction can be set and unintended consequences are removed;
3. Recognition needs to be given to the importance of the delivery of digital programmes to assist with the provision of public services. Unless such recognition is accepted, progress towards full digital deployment will remain limited.

1. Develop a digital skills partnership approach

There is now clear evidence that many UK adults lack even the most basic digital skills. House of Commons researchers estimate that 8.5 million adults lack basic digital skills, while 7.5 million lack the essential digital skills needed for the workplace.

The same research found that 3% of the UK population, around 1.6 million people, have no internet access and are completely offline. In addition, 25% of older people aged over 61 are unable to complete essential online tasks, substantially increasing their risk of digital exclusion.

These figures are unacceptable and show that limited engagement with digital skills awareness and training is a major barrier to economic growth and social inclusion.

The competences set out in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 have to be balanced and linked if they are to be delivered effectively. Digital provision is fundamental to that delivery. The CLA believes that there is an onus on strategic authorities to develop a skills partnership approach that includes business and their representatives, the banking sector and academia. This would lead to greater collaboration and co-ordination, and would ensure more targeted delivery.

2. Setting the strategic direction to co-ordinate the delivery of digital support

One of the major problems that has been highlighted is the lack of strategic direction of digital support at the local level. If it is accepted that digital can act as a key enabler to key sectors it is essential that there is sufficient digital infrastructure. To make this work for the rural economy it is necessary that all parts of the digital sector play their part. Without a consensus between those directly involved, such as between landowners and infrastructure providers, the opportunities that digital generates could be lost.

The CLA believes that the bodies that constitute local decision-making, including strategic authorities and unitary authorities, need to provide the necessary strategic direction. Working in tandem with the digital industry, regional government can provide the impetus needed for greater co-ordination of digital support.

To make this work, and to balance the responsibilities under the Devolution Act 2026, strategic authorities should consider setting a series of priorities, in the form of a digital charter, and agreed with the digital sector. These need to include a clear understanding of the needs of both rural businesses and rural communities and how digital support can meet rural need.

3. Using digital to underpin public services

Local problems should be addressed through local understanding and solutions. This is the central tenet of devolution, in that local decision makers should have a better understanding of the local geography than national policy makers. This also means that digital connectivity can greatly help the provision of public services that are targeted and efficient, thus, saving public money.

There have already been a number of public sectors that use the advancement in digital to provide better services. These include healthcare and social care, local government administration, emergency services and public safety, and transport and the environment.

However, to make the use of digital connectivity even better when delivering for the public, it has to be equitable and fair. But once more, this comes back to the perennial problem of the rural-urban digital divide. This divide means that rural areas are simply not in the position to benefit from new digital technologies. The lack of fixed infrastructure, delays in deploying mobile networks, and a failure to put in place the necessary collaborative processes required means rural England being left behind, all because of distance and the unique qualities of the countryside.