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Jennette Arnold OBE AM

Hackney, Islington & Waltham Forest

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Dear Andrew,

Thank you for your email of 2nd December setting out the recommendations from your response to the recent GLA consultation on London's infrastructure needs.

Whilst reading your note during the Christmas break and mindful of the increasing volume of casework Assembly Members are receiving from Londoners who have lost faith by BT's ability to deliver high speed broadband, I have written today to place on record my concerns.

The points you make in the response also raise a number of questions, which I hope you may be able to help me with. I have summarised my concerns under the headings below:

Current and Projected Coverage

The current and projected coverage of broadband fibre is simply not good enough. At a national level, your note references 90% of UK premises being able to access fibre broadband as if that is a level to be proud of– it really is very low. The final 10% will run to many premises whose very existence in the future will depend on access, and they are being completely ignored. That is not a sustainable position.

Fibre broadband is only at 88% of premises at the moment in London. Stats like that make a nonsense of the Mayor's grand proclamations about London being the best city in the world to start a tech business. We can and must do better.

Your note states quite matter of factly that the public will have to pay for coverage to get to 100%. That simply isn't acceptable. Another solution must be found. Broadband is now a key utility similar to water and electricity. It would be unacceptable for a water company to refuse to connect a housing estate simply because of the perception that the economics would not work out; the same thinking must now apply to broadband.

New Developments and Regulatory Changes

The submission discusses the need for connectivity infrastructure to be put in new developments as standard and this is something the Labour Group have supported through the alterations to the London Plan process. All steps should be taken to ensure that the creation of further gaps in connectivity is avoided. In relation to regulatory changes, I would be interested to hear further details of what changes would be required and what benefits might arise as a consequence for Londoners.

Digital Inclusion, Upgrading Infrastructure and Market Demand

I agree with you that digital inclusion is a serious concern but in order to combat this we need a much more co-ordinated approach from both the Mayor and the private sector. It is important that

we don't forget the extent to which technology has moved on. People who may have done a digital inclusion course at a city community college in the 1990s might find themselves excluded again in later life by the fast pace of technological change.

I was somewhat stunned by your comment that "the fibre network infrastructure that is being delivered today meets current and projected needs, and can be upgraded in a modular manner as needs evolve". Firstly, it is patently not the case that the fibre infrastructure being delivered today meets current needs. I said at the start of my letter about the noticeable spike in casework received relating to broadband and this would clearly suggest rising public dissatisfaction. It is also contradictory to other statements in your submission where you state that 90% of UK premises are able to access fibre broadband. Clearly if 10% of premises are not being served then their needs are not being met. Furthermore, if the needs of SMEs are not being met presently, it is difficult to see how their projected requirements will be met.

When examining "market demand" the submission argues that "public authorities (should) take steps to increase the level". Once again, this is not a situation I recognise. There is ample demand for the delivery of superfast broadband from both domestic and business customers. I am not sure what further steps the GLA or other bodies should take to demonstrate this.

On the question of broadband speeds it is far from clear the London is performing well. A survey released shortly before Christmas ranked London 26 out of 33 other European cities with Bucharest, Paris and Vilnius all beating London.

If London is to deal effectively with the connectivity crisis that is affecting many domestic and business customers then much greater clarity will be required from the Mayor on how the Connectivity Advisory Group, LEP, LEP Infrastructure Working Group and Smart London Board will interact to deal with this problem.

At the end of your note you detail ways of checking fibre broadband availability and options for premises that are not currently served. I appreciate this information although I fear that it will fall a long way of short of the level of connectivity that my constituents expect and require, in order to be fully engaged with the technological change that is changing our daily lives.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jennette Arnold". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM

Assembly Member for Hackney, Islington & Waltham Forest