Connecting for good in the regions
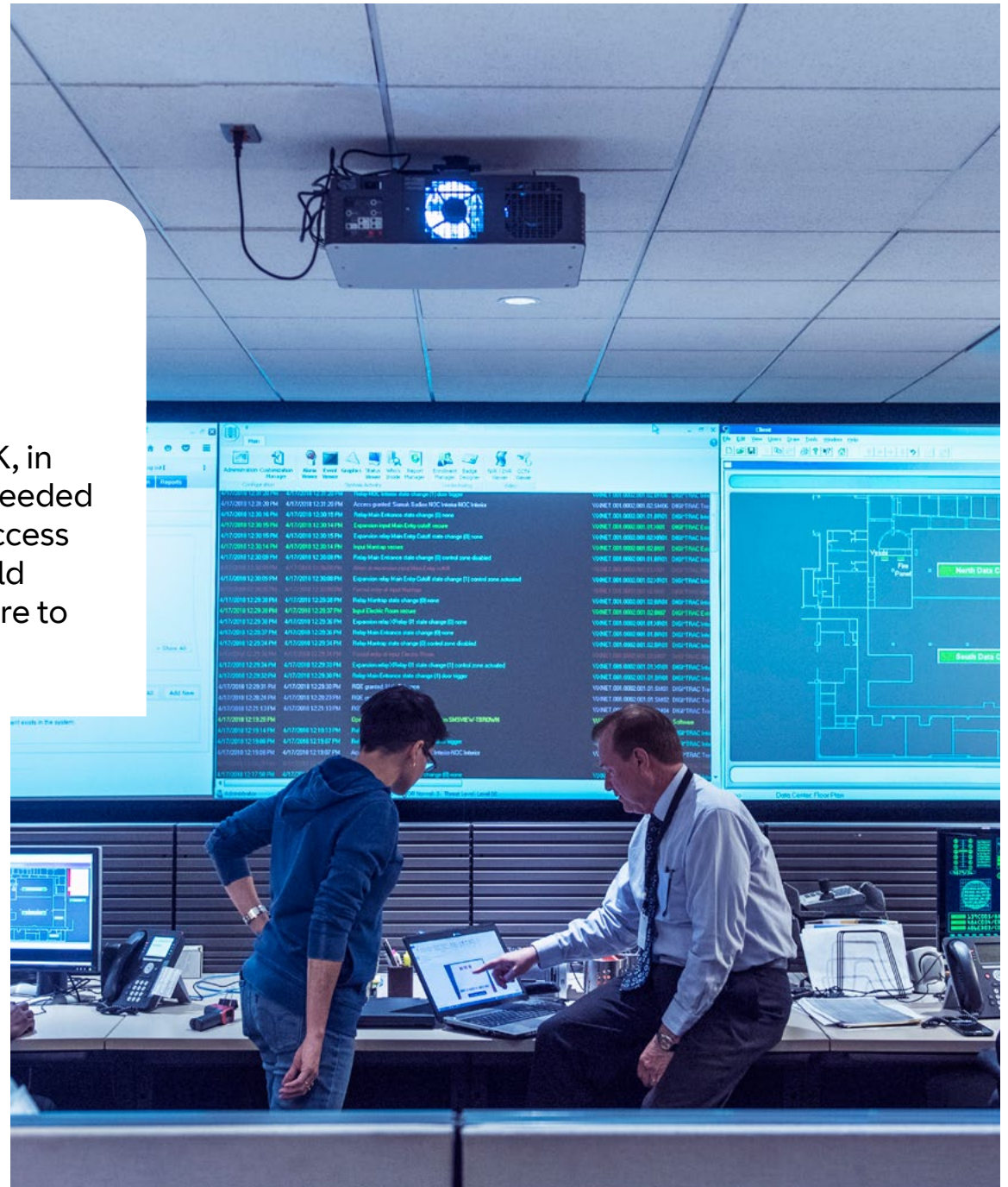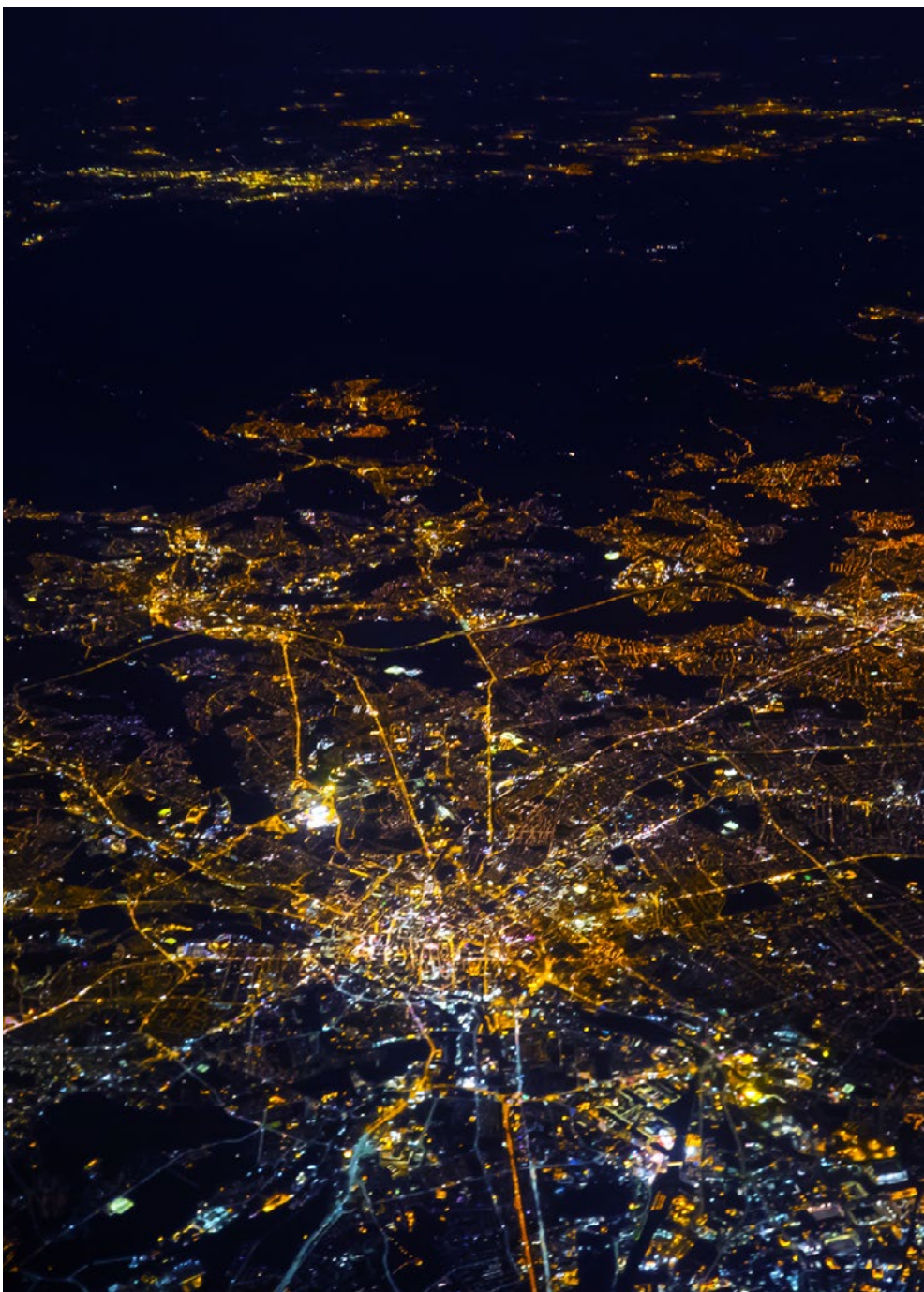
Ideas for your next mayor

BT Group welcomes the opportunity to outline key policy areas for the UK's combined city regions ahead of the elections in May 2021.

Effective digital and smart city strategies provide an opportunity for combined authorities to build back better, and address regional productivity differences, as regional economies recover from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Our priorities for smart city regions and levelling up the UK place digital at the heart of this economic recovery.

Progress delivery of smart city regions

The pandemic has accelerated reliance on online technology for people and businesses across the UK, in an unprecedented manner. Never before have we needed to turn so quickly to rely on digital connectivity to access basic services, work and education. The phrase 'Build Back Better' has become synonymous with the desire to make sure the recovery is greener, and smarter.

Build Back Better: Smart City Regions and Smart Citizens

Prioritising policies to develop smart city regions and smart public services should be central to the Build Back Better agenda. Smart cities or places have the potential to deliver a better quality of life and inclusive economic growth. Cities can have smart and sustainable economies powered by renewable energy, and using data and technology to drive the transformation of services.

A recent survey we conducted revealed that while 91% of council directors are familiar with the idea of a smart city, 36% of them don't currently have a smart city strategy.

We believe the next mayor should:

- Ensure the development of smart city policies lie at the heart of their digital strategies; these strategies should drive public and private data sharing and contribute to economic growth through enhanced productivity of public services
- Explore ways 5G can be used to support innovative public services and solutions, to accelerate digital transformation at a regional level.

Reducing barriers to full fibre broadband connectivity

We believe that the Build Back Better agenda must include an approach to reduce barriers across the UK, helping to connect the country and supporting businesses and households and allowing access to basic services. To support this, we're spending £12bn to bring full fibre connections to 20 million homes in the UK by the mid-to-late 2020s.

City regions should support the fibre industry's call to remove barriers to fibre deployment. The Industrial Strategy Council's report found a direct correlation between productivity and access to fast broadband. But planning delays and the effectiveness of deployment personnel can have a material impact on delivery. Both can be affected by the regime within local authorities, which may not allow innovative deployment techniques and create delays with street works permissions.

We believe the next mayor should:

- Work with local authorities to reduce local authority planning delays, and allow for innovative deployment techniques and increase ease of access to street works permissions.

Prioritising digital to deliver regional economic growth

In the context of the Covid-19 crisis, combined authority regions are well-positioned to build back economies that are more resilient, inclusive, and green. We believe that technology, research, and innovation will play a crucial role in achieving this goal.

While the Covid-19 pandemic has seen many businesses change their models to adapt to the new challenges, not all businesses have been able to do so quickly.

A thriving SME sector providing employment, innovation and diversity is at the heart of every city's economy. Policies designed to protect these businesses and support their recovery will be vital for the economy overall.

We believe the next mayor should:

- Support and deliver policies to bring digital transformation and skills by small and medium-sized enterprises, as the pandemic has expedited the need for digital embedding in business.

Delivering smart cities in a green recovery

We strongly support the accelerated opportunities that Covid-19 presents for a green growth recovery. We see a significant role for low carbon digital enabling technologies to help cities meet their net zero targets. This includes the uptake of electric vehicles; environmental monitoring and traffic optimisation sensors that integrate into street furniture; and smart building energy management technology to cover both social housing and public estate footprint, which can utilise the IoT network. We believe that changes in lifestyle behaviour and work practices brought on by the pandemic represent an opportunity to improve individual wellbeing.

We believe the next mayor should:

- Support policies that develop corporate and public sector electric vehicle (EV) uptake, through stimulating EV supply and investment in EV charging infrastructure
- Aid the adoption of remote working in organisations by utilising shared working spaces or hubs in local communities. These could help support businesses return to cities and towns providing a location for face-to-face meetings as and when required.

Skills for Tomorrow – digitally upskilling our city regions

Our Skills for Tomorrow programme aims to help over 10 million people in the UK make the most of life in the digital world. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic it has become clear that developing digital skills is now more important than ever.

Bridging the digital divide and upskilling the nation

The pandemic has highlighted the inequalities of digital exclusion while demonstrating the importance of having the right skills to navigate and access the digital world. Many are adapting to technology in ways we couldn't have imagined before the crisis, and reaping the essential benefits of digital access.

Small businesses and job seekers need support to develop the digital skills to thrive in the current challenging economic environment. Families and teachers need support to help children stay safe, have fun and keep learning online; and older, vulnerable people and those with low or no digital skills need support to stay in touch with family and friends and access vital services.

We believe the next mayor should:

- Reduce inequality by developing new digital skills for all ages through initiatives such as our Skills for Tomorrow programme

- Recognise and support small and medium-sized enterprises that have been forced out of necessity to embrace increased digital sophistication at an accelerated pace

- Explore how digital technologies and innovation can help businesses respond to the crisis and contribute towards the economic recovery, both in terms of actions that need to be put in place now and the steps that must be taken to maximise the potential of technology.

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