



## Martin Horwood MP

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### **Digital Britain & Springbank**

Thank you for the opportunity to meet your team recently. I am writing to you in response to the *Digital Britain* interim report and in particular to reinforce the points made at the meeting in relation to my constituents in Springbank and other areas of Cheltenham. As I explained in the meeting and in earlier correspondence, the core problem in this area is that an unusually centralised exchange in Cheltenham has combined with original developers failing to agree any deal with cable suppliers when the houses were built. This has left many properties too far from the exchange by copper wire to receive even a remotely satisfactory service, Housebuyers can be forgiven for not even having thought to check whether such a routine broadband connection was available when they bought their brand new properties in a major conurbation of 110,000 people.

First can I say that I endorse the interim report's emphasis on effective next generation access networks as a crucial element in Britain's competitiveness and its objective that this access should be fairly available to nearly all.

The competitiveness argument applies at a micro as well as a macro level of course. Individual businesses based at home or employees working from home – as we would now encourage them to do – depend on a decent broadband connection to communicate, access networks, download documents in reasonable time and literally remain 'up to speed' with competitors at home and abroad. In an urban neighbourhood in a town of 110,000 people like Cheltenham,

I also welcome the recommendations in section 4 of the report, particularly the proposed Universal Service Commitment by 2012 based on a 2Mb per second broadband speed which would in itself force suppliers to address the problems in Cheltenham.

But 2012 is still three years away and there seems to me a strong argument for addressing the particular problems in urban areas like Springbank on an urgent basis. Especially in the current climate, many jobs could be lost or businesses fold in the next three years and to be left without adequate access to the internet in this situation would be particularly serious. Job searches would be hampered, flexibility in offering working from

home to potential employers would of course be inhibited and even, in extremis, the sale of houses might have to be undertaken at more of a loss than in an area with a proper connection. The expectations of people in remote rural locations where access would have been an obvious issue would obviously have been lower. But in otherwise perfectly typical new neighbourhoods in major conurbations, lack of access obviously comes as a huge shock. To quote just a couple of my constituents:

- *"I am in my GCSE year, entering Cleeve Sixth form, in which I am doing a computing course, some of which is online, hence the importance of the Broadband.*

*I saw the article in the Echo today saying that over 800 houses in Springbank do not have broadband, I am finding this difficult to understand considering it is a major housing estate"*

- *"Getting broadband has become a nightmare. My girlfriend started to become a trainee teacher and needed a computer and especially broadband to download and complete her work. I purchased the PC no problem, we then took out a package to get broadband with Sky. After about six weeks of calls to Sky telling them we had technical problem and couldn't get the broadband we were then told by them that we were too far away from the BT exchange and couldn't get a strong enough signal.... I think the service from them has been appalling for this day and age of technology."*

As I have also mentioned before there is the real prospect of hundreds of residents turning into many thousands as the Regional Spatial Strategy has earmarked this area as an area of search for five thousand new homes.

The Caio report left open the option of government spending to correct market failures in the supply of broadband. In this or any other market intervention by government I would strongly urge that anomalous situations like Springbank's are made an explicit and high priority. Given historical factors like Cheltenham's quite unusual exchange, I cannot believe there are actually very many urban populations in this situation so this is unlikely to represent much of a spending commitment. But I think it would be one well worth making in this economic climate and given just how badly let down these residents feel.

I am happy to repeat my offer to you to visit Springbank yourself and meet some of those affected.

I look forward to the final report.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Martin Horwood". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

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