

DIGITAL BRITAIN REPORT

Response by Ofcom Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland (ACNI)

1. You might like to make it clear that this report, regardless of its title, is about the UK's Digital future. In the report the terms Britain, Great Britain and UK are used interchangeably. That is unfortunate since many readers will assume that as a Government Report the terms Great Britain or Britain are deliberately used, as they normally are, to differentiate between GB and the UK.

In this report that, of course, is not the intent and could be avoided by referring to the UK throughout (except where it is accurate to use GB or Britain). The title of the final report might have a strapline like: Digital Britain
- The UK's Digital Future.

2. We noted the recognition in the Foreword that “the Government is a major purchaser of digital, knowledge economy services and it uses them increasingly in the wider delivery of public services

This acknowledges that in this role the Government is a major consumer of digital services and therefore has a significant influence on the market. This is an important issue for the devolved nations, particularly NI, and for rural areas where traditional private sector forces may result in market failure. But the UK wide obligation to provide equality of public services in health, education, information and so on will create a major demand on Digital Britain networks and infrastructure.

We note and welcome the points made in support of the Community Broadband Network proposal for an umbrella body to bring together all the local and community networks and provide them with technical and advisory support.

We would suggest that perhaps a similar level of coordination should be required between public sector bodies to ensure optimal use of the networks and infrastructure, which may then be more widely used by citizen consumers and business. Previous developments of IT networks resulted in a great waste of resources, human and financial, by the development of ring fenced Department Specific Networks. That culture, whether in central government or in the devolved administrations, may still persist and it would be unfortunate if such a pattern was repeated. Indeed the planned roll out of the major public sector network based services would require an approach which mirrored the DSO project.

It is important that Government sees the delivery of these public services in consumer terms, along with other private sector, citizen, and community consumers, and something separate from its role as stated in the foreword as the guardian of national resources that are critical to the sector, and its legitimate wider public policy interests which include the relevance, accessibility and ease of access to digital services to limit digital exclusion. And this surely includes its role in the never-ending challenge of media literacy which, unfortunately, we think, is not mentioned specifically strongly enough. A digital society without the confidence or skills to use it will slow down the sort of innovation and consumer demand necessary to drive the market.

3. We welcome the creation of the Information Age Partnership. To what extent will this IAP be advised by consumer, including the public sector, application planners and strategists? The leading IT, Electronics, Communications and Content companies can provide solutions but they themselves are not teachers, surgeons, environmental scientists or artists – the point is that real

innovation in the use of technology in any field lies with the professional in that field - not the providers, promoters or even developers of the technology. In effect, it lies in the strength of the partnership that they develop.

4. The Five Objectives: these are appropriate and provide a clear statement of the Report's objectives. However, they are not equally developed within the rest of the report.

There are a couple of areas, however, where the actions are not sufficient to cover the objectives. For instance, the last objective is "Developing the infrastructure, skills and take-up to enable the widespread online delivery of public services *and business interface with Government*" (emphasis added). Apart from a passing reference on page 55 to the ability for employers to pay tax online, there appears to be very little in the report about the role of ICT in business-to-government interactions. Reducing the burden of doing business with the government is a huge issue, especially (but not solely) for SMEs, so there might have been more detail supporting this objective. There is almost an underlying assumption that business has got this under control, which we think is unjustified, especially for rural areas and SMEs.

Another area where the actions appear insufficient to support the objectives is in the area of media literacy, which is dealt with in more detail below.

5.1 Digital Networks

- Action 5 ("The Government will help implement the Community Broadband Network's proposals for an umbrella body to bring together all the local and community networks and provide them with technical and advisory support") is very welcome and could be of particular relevance to Northern Ireland. As mentioned earlier we would like to see a corresponding statement made about public service networks and infrastructure to ensure maximum benefit, not just to public sector services, but also to the consumers (business, citizens and community) they serve and with whom they interact.

5.2 Mobile Wireless Networks

We noted that no specific action is discussed related to exploring and determining how the rollout of new networks or the further development of existing networks can resolve the issues of rural and geological barriers. This is always identified as an exclusion problem so it's surprising that the need to find a solution or solutions is it not a key interim requirement or at least a target for the next phase.

5.3 Digital Television Networks

Action 7: The DSO help scheme with a return path capability is an option but it may be just one of several possibilities that might be considered. It might also be sensible to consider DTT plus a return path as one of several options for providing the broadband universal service, in the same way that mobile broadband is!

Action 8: This seems to imply that the information channels used to inform consumers about DSO are equally suitable for more general information about the digital agenda. But people *have* to know about DSO, otherwise their televisions won't work come analogue switch-off. The same imperatives just don't apply to other forms of "digitisation". The report itself makes the point, on page 25 (in relation to mobile) that users in general don't care about the underlying technology: what they care about is services. Users are unlikely to be receptive to a general message about "digital"; service

providers, on the other hand, will be happy to advertise the services and applications that will drive take-up.

5.4 Digital Radio Networks

This seems to say that regardless of what the market says we are going to make Digital Radio work. We hope it succeeds – it has much to offer to communities and can make a strong social contribution.

It would, however, be interesting to investigate the perceptions of various age groups and how these change over time; just as television and the pc have developed to have similar roles amongst different age groups, perhaps the same type of pattern will develop between mobile phone based devices and digital radio. One suspects that for many age groups digital radio is essentially a better quality radio.

5.5 Digital Content

Agreed, but can you also examine measures to prevent its automatic migration to urban centres where there tends to be an assumption that that is where the highest levels of broadband speed will occur. One would like to see a clearer indication that a distribution of content creation locations is seen in the same way as home working is mentioned as a benefit of high speed broadband

Lough Erne is at least as congenial a place to work as Canary Wharf as far as home working and content creation are concerned - given appropriate high speed broadband.

5.6 Network Universal Connectivity

Action 17: 2Mb/s would be an improvement but will not enable some of the services discussed earlier in the document, such as e-health or distance learning. The proposal on its own is likely to lead to criticism, as again the report itself says (page 20) that "Between now and 2012 demand for average speeds of 20Mb/s is likely". On the other hand, there are considerable investment hurdles to be overcome in achieving a more widespread distribution of higher speeds.

What might be valuable is to enable access through community networks, such as schools and libraries. It's interesting that, in the discussion of the narrowband universal service (page 55), the report mentions BT's obligation to provide a network of public call boxes. These could be regarded as low-tech community access points for those who cannot afford an individual connection. Community access points could enable non-exclusive access to higher speeds to be provided as part of the universal service, in addition to the ubiquitous lower speed, thus achieving a more satisfactory compromise between speed and coverage.

Action 19: We welcome this approach and would hope that such an experiment or experiments might be focused on rural areas and the nations – seeing real benefits in action will drive up levels of media literacy. As mentioned above, the report itself makes the point, on page 25 (in relation to mobile) that users in general don't care about the underlying technology: what they care about is services. 'Just in time' media literacy training, to coincide with the necessity of using relevant and obligatory digital mediated services, is the essence of effective media literacy.

In Northern Ireland where we have (Ofcom's figures) a 35% rural population, the lowest levels of disposable income and the highest spend on communications the need for a demonstration of the benefits of the digital age is compelling – a practical demonstration that Digital UK really does include NI.

Action 21: As you will have gathered we strongly support a Public Service Delivery plan. The needs of the public sector in terms of delivering its services represents we feel the largest customer of the Digital Britain network and infrastructure in Northern Ireland. Otherwise the market, except in Belfast, will not support the level of digital service experienced in most other parts of the UK. The impact of this in a digital world will inhibit business development and growth, particularly for SMEs. And the rural areas will be worst off. There are no large cities in Northern Ireland other than Belfast, and so there may be no corridor of cables from which digital spurs may develop. Equality of services in public service provision may therefore be the key driver which enables equality of digital networks and infrastructure. USO in public services will be a more powerful driver than the digital Universal Service Commitment; indeed it should inform the level of Universal Service Commitment.

There is a tendency for each beneficial step forward in technology enhancement to widen the inequality gap that previously existed, and then there is a costly catch up gap to be funded. Surely it is best to seek to minimize the gap at this stage and continue to narrow it as each step forward occurs.

5.7 Media Literacy

We ignore media literacy at our peril. It is part of the ongoing future. The next level of technology change fuels the next step in media literacy requirement, while previous steps continue to exist. And the speed at which these occur is increasing.

And we see that media literacy is probably best advanced when there is a 'want to do' or a 'have to do' rather than go to the next page sort of approach – a sort of action based experiential approach.

The International Telecommunications Union recent report on "Measuring the Information Society: the ICT Development Index" (available at http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/publications/idi/2009/material/IDI2009_w5.pdf) looks at measures of ICT development in three main areas: ICT Readiness (infrastructure and access), ICT Use (take-up and usage) and ICT Capability (skills). The UK ranked 10th in this report (based on 2007 figures), unchanged from the last time the report was done in 2002. Obviously this is a very strong position. However, the rankings for the three main areas varied widely. In ICT Readiness, the UK rated 10th in the world, down from 8th in 2002; in ICT Use it ranked 14th, up from 16th; but in Skills, it rated 28th, down from 10th. These figures have to be used with caution, as the indicators used to compile the rankings are adult literacy and secondary and tertiary enrolment - in other words, they are general measures of literacy and education, not specific to IT, which the ITU uses as proxy measures in the absence of comparable data for a large number of countries that would measure more specific ICT-related skills. However, they do suggest that if there is a weakness, it is likely to be in the skills area. The Digital Britain interim report, however, does not suggest any actions in this area, but says "We will return with recommendations across digital life-skills, digital work-skills and digital economy skills, in the final Digital Britain report". We would strongly encourage that considerable attention is paid to this element in the final report, especially with regard to rural and less densely populated areas where access to training and education may be limited.