

SOUTH WEST RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM

Response to the “DIGITAL BRITAIN” Interim Report



The South West Rural Affairs Forum is pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the recent Interim Report “Digital Britain”. We particularly welcome the commitment to action which is implied in the report and urge that such action is not delayed. The current recession is having a wide and deep impact on the rural communities of the South West and a vital component in their recovery will be the ability of its many and varied Micro and Small to Medium Enterprises being able to utilise Digital communication.

In particular, we would like to comment on two key aspects:

- The addition of the USC (Universal Service Commitment) to make available a minimum internet connection speed to most of the UK’s population
- The transfer from Analogue radio to Digital Radio (DAB)

The Universal Service Commitment (USC) of a minimum internet access speed for all.

This is probably the most discussed aspect of the report by the Media over the last month. With the majority of responses quite rightly considering the specification of the USC to be way too little, way too late.

The detail of the USC action within the interim report is as follows:

‘We will develop plans for a digital Universal Service Commitment to be effective by 2012, delivered by a mixture of fixed and mobile, wired and wireless means. Subject to further study of the costs and benefits, we will set out our plans for the level of service which we believe should be universal. We anticipate this consideration will include options up to 2Mb/s’

Background:

A recent BBC report (26 Feb) detailed that the South West of England currently have 19.9% ‘out of range’ of services which would meet the 2Mb/s internet access speed ‘option’. This was only surpassed by lack of coverage within Northern Ireland and Wales.

This is despite Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly having 99% broadband coverage, (according to a recent report by ActNow Cornwall) and one of the largest uptakes of Rural Broadband in the country (mostly due to ActNow’s work over the last five

years). Broadband is now widely available, but speeds are often very low, and many services are unable to achieve the minimum that the interim report suggest should be made available.

It has been widely discussed within the media that the USC will supersede BT's USO (Universal Services Obligation) whereby BT have been obliged since privatisation in 1984 to provide fixed lines to all and ensure that their services are affordable. The new USC appears to share this responsibility with other organisations and other services (mobile operators, 3G services and satellite) to provide Internet access, instead of just fixed line voice services. The new USC specifies the provision of services, but **not** that they have to remain affordable.

Interestingly the report also considers universality to have been achieved at 98.5% coverage.

Whilst it is admirable that 98.5% of the population should be able to subscribe to a minimum speed Internet Access if they wish, the speed which is being suggested as being available to subscribers (2Mb/s) is very low in comparison to the speeds which would be expected by 2012 across the UK (let alone the rest of the world).

Currently, Internet speeds in the South West, and Cornwall in particular, are already lagging behind the midlands, South East and elsewhere. Recently, Ofcom submitted to BT's Price control plans over future fibre optic cabling which paves the way to around 40% of the UK having the option to subscribe to broadband speeds of 40-100Mb/s by around 2012. Elsewhere, other countries with already established higher speed services are considering updating their 100Mb/s services to 1000Mb/s services over the next decade! Comparing them to the USC plan that over the next 3 years, 'most' of the 19.9% of the Southwest who are currently 'out-of-range' of 2Mb/s services, being able to achieve up-to 2Mb/s speed if they wish. With 99% Broadband coverage/availability in Cornwall already, we fail to see how increasing poorly performing connections to a minimum 2Mb/s will have much of an effect.

Looking to the future: Whilst the heavily populated areas of the UK benefit from BT's fibre expansion first, it may be that Cornwall and the South West can benefit further from hand-me-down equipment when it is no longer needed, and if so, may be able to achieve speeds up to 24Mb/s which are widely available elsewhere in the country already. However, we will continue to be one step behind many of the UK's cities, and two steps behind the rest of the world if we continue to accept this approach. It will also have little impact on those currently considered 'out-of-range'.

Other technologies are slowly becoming available across Cornwall, which will make a contribution to the USC, particularly 3G mobile technology which has the potential to be able to offer Internet connection speeds comparable to Cornwall's current fixed line capabilities. Despite its potential, 3G currently falls way behind fixed line coverage within the region, and without considerable investment by the companies

who run these services, is unlikely to contribute in a significant way to the aims of the USC by reaching areas where fixed line access is not available or adequate.

Satellite broadband technology is another contributor towards the achievement of the modest aims of the USC. Some satellite services are already available and later this year, Avanti Communications are due to launch a satellite names Hylas, which is designed to provide Broadband Internet access to much of Europe, including Cornwall and the South West of England. They are currently describing their intention to provide tiered internet access speed services, up to 2Mb/s. The satellite should be fully operational in advance of 2012.

It would seem that the Hylas satellite alone is able to fulfil all of the requirements of the interim report USC, that being the “up to 2Mb/s minimum internet connection speed availability”. However, costs of subscribing to their service will be considerably higher than other methods of internet access. One could wonder if Lord Carter was made aware of the intended deployment of this satellite service before suggesting, and now defending within the media, a relatively low minimum access speed requirement as the aims of the USC. If the minimum available speed suggested remains the same when the report is finalised, Hylas will (just) achieve the target across the whole of the UK, but at an extra cost to the consumer, and without further speed increase potential built in to provide for the future.

Transfer to DAB.

The report details the establishment of a plan to discontinue analogue radio, to be fully replace with Digital (DAB) radio in the not to distant future. In a similar way to the discontinuation of Analogue Television to be fully replace by Digital Television which is due to be fully completed across Cornwall by the end of this year. (expected by September 2009)

The Criteria for when the transition timetable will begin is detailed as:

- i) When 50% of radio listening is digital
- ii) When DAB coverage is comparable to FM coverage, and local DAB reaches 90% of population and all major roads

The DAB coverage maps of Cornwall for example, show that Cornwall already has wide coverage of DAB transmission from the 7 transmitters which cover Devon and Cornwall. As there are currently no plans for future additional transmitters in the region, the current DAB coverage may be the same now, as it will be following the discontinuation of the analogue service in years to come.

The imminent change to Digital Television over the next few months will show how well the message, and assistance provided towards the television switchover has worked. Only then are we likely to have a better idea of the impact the future radio

switchover will cause those is isolated, rural, and rugged areas who may struggle to achieve a terrestrial signal. A similar approach is being planned for the Radio switchover. We feel it is important to ensure that those in Rural communities are able to feed back their experiences of the television switchover, to allow feedback to be given to improve the implementation of the Radio switchover.

Most individuals own more radios than televisions (including vehicle radios), radio's also seem to last longer than TV's. As there is unlikely to be a 'set-top-box' equivalent system to enable old radio equipment to work following the switchover, most radio's will be of little or no future use and are likely to be disposed of in the lead up to, and following the switchover. This is likely to create a notable increase in waste electronic equipment as a result, much of which will be working equipment that is no longer able to be used in this country. Recycling schemes should consider that other areas of the world which continue to use analogue radio, and could benefit greatly from the contribution of functional equipment, rather than it's disposal as waste within the UK.

As far as DAB coverage is concerned, surveys carried out now will likely determine areas where terrestrial Radio will not be available in future. However as both Satellite and Digital Television signals also relay radio stations, it may just be the method of accessing radio which changes, rather than the ability to listen. We are unsure if local radio will also be available via satellite television transmission for those who are unable to receive Digital Radio once the transition occurs.

We hope this issue will be addressed closer to the time of transition which, however, is unlikely to be within the next 5-6 years.

Conclusions:

The South west Rural affairs Forum is keen to endorse the broad based commitment to do something, but is concerned that what is being proposed is too little. To specify a minimum of up to 2 M/bs of service for Broadband users will still mean that many rural communities continue to suffer poor quality services and slow transmission times. If businesses are to thrive in rural communities they deserve better than this.

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