

# **Progress Report from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs**

## **Rural Broadband**

1. The Government welcomes this opportunity to update the Select Committee on progress on rural broadband in the last six months.
2. Good progress has been made on increasing the availability of broadband in rural areas since the publication of the Rural Broadband Report in October 2003. The Government particularly welcomes the announcement by BT in November 2003 which set a goal to provide broadband access to 100% of communities by 2005 and set trigger levels at all but the 600 smallest of it's exchanges. Currently 85% of communities received coverage and this is expected to rise to 90% by summer 2004.
3. The Government continues to play an active role to support the availability and take-up of broadband in rural areas. The joint DTI/Defra Rural Broadband Unit are working with a wide range of suppliers, user groups and with local, regional and national government to help foster partnerships and to development and implement a strategy to achieve 100% broadband coverage. The following activities have taken place since the October report:
  - a) The DTI and Defra recently hosted a workshop 'Working Together to Build Broadband Britain'. It brought together a wide spectrum of interests and influencers to consider a way forward in reaching the last 10% of communities that cannot currently receive broadband. We will send a copy of the workshop minutes to the Committee when they are available shortly.
  - b) Defra will be sponsoring a National Innovation Award for Best Rural E-Business and Community at the E-Commerce Awards this year. The E-Commerce Awards are run by the DTI and Interforum, a not for profit organisation that helps British businesses to trade electronically, to promote the use of information and communications technology to SMEs, charities and voluntary groups. The awards will be formally launched on 7th April 2004.
  - c) The Government is still committed to ensuring that central government services are made available electronically by 2005. The UK Online Annual Report 2003, which was published in December 2003, showed that 66% of services were e-enabled by the second quarter of 2003 and that all government departments are still on track for getting all government services on line by 2005.
  - d) To raise awareness of both the benefits of broadband and how to bring broadband to areas without broadband coverage, the OTI/Defra Rural Broadband Team have recently produced a toolkit 'Rural Broadband: Help bring broadband to your community'

and will be spreading the message to rural communities by exhibiting at the County Shows later this year. A copy of the Broadband Toolkit is attached.

e) Steven Bell from Defra has recently joined the DTI/Defra Rural Broadband Unit on secondment. This will ensure that Defra continue to be fully engaged in the issues relating to rural broadband.

f) Ten public libraries across England will soon be able to provide wireless access to the internet. The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) is working in partnership with the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and The Countryside Agency on a £60,000 pilot project to help rural communities take further advantage of broadband internet services. Local people will be able to turn up at their nearest library WiFi site and log on to the internet simply by switching on their own wireless-enabled computer. There will also be opportunities to loan WiFi equipment from the library

g) DTI are working on producing a guidance note to help stakeholders understand State Aids requirements, including the issues raised by recent Commission decisions.

h) Nine new Regional Aggregation Bodies (RABs) have been set up by the Government since November 2003, one in each of the English regions in partnership with the RDAs to be responsible for: buying broadband services for public sector organisations and cutting costs for public sector customers, particularly schools and hospitals. In a community, the RABs will join up individual public sector broadband requirements and present them as one bigger package to the market. This will deliver better value deals and drive up availability by making it more attractive to telecommunications companies to make the capital investment necessary to provide broadband in new areas.

i) In December 2003 the DTI opened the 5.8Ghz Band C spectrum to a wide user base ranging from existing telecommunication and Internet Service Providers through to community, health and educational sectors. Authorisation to use this band will be under the management of the new Ofcom regulatory body from February 2004. This will help to bring new low-cost wireless broadband connections to rural communities.

j) The Community Broadband Network was launched in January 2004. Supported by government, industry and the co-operative movement, CBN has been set up to help communities get access to affordable broadband, including creating their own services, using social enterprise models.

*4 May 2004*