

## Spectrum & Skills key to UK Broadband Future

*There are no technical barriers to achieving universal broadband coverage in the UK, only economic ones.*

This poignant and direct observation set the backdrop for the **UK Broadband Futures** conference in London on 10 October. The bulk of Jeremy Hunt's £530m broadband fund has been **allocated to local authorities**, and recently George Osborne allocated **£150m in Treasury funds** for wireless internet access in unviable, mostly rural areas. Nevertheless, the coverage target is set at an unambitious 95%, which will leave swathes of the UK without broadband access upon completion of the **Broadband Delivery UK** programme.

However, physical access is not the only barrier to internet take up, as outlined by Helen Milner from **UK Online Centres**. Motivational factors and lack of skills also add to the digital divide, with 9 million people in the UK having not accessed the internet once in their lives. This growing digital underclass is the subject of a **recent report** by LSE's Ellen Helsper, which explains how digital-only public services will be unavailable to those who need them most due to a lack of (effective) take-up of available internet connections.

In terms of extending access, wireless is generally seen as the solution to for rural areas that are not viable to hardwire. However, any plans to move forward with wireless have had a recent setback with **yet another delay to the 800MHz and 2.6GHz spectrum auction**. The auction is now scheduled for late 2012, and the spectrum will not be available until 2013 – meaning that it could be 2-3 years before many of the internet 'not spots' are closed with wireless technologies.

Simon Towler from Ofcom admitted that they are "behind the curve" in this area, which is quite an understatement considering the UK was leading the path in Europe with early spectrum auctions and will now be the last country in Western Europe to auction 4g spectrum. The general feeling from many stakeholders at the UK Broadband Futures event seems to have gone beyond frustration, and is now approaching exhaustion.

There are also concerns from some that the next generation of digital spectrum is going to be too fractured, with several operators getting a slice of the spectrum, limiting the capability of throughput. The alternative to this would be to have a single national wholesaler of the entire block of spectrum, offering maximised capacity to extend to rural areas, but limiting competition and potentially limiting innovation.

A recent **report from the Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee** backs this year's unanimous decision made by the House to extend the coverage obligation for at least one of the mobile licencees from 95% to 98%. The question remains if those who get technical access to broadband through mobile networks are any more likely to have the motivations and skills to actually use it.

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