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DIGITAL FUTURES – RURAL OPPORTUNITY OR THREAT?

The digital divide that has been reported extensively, concerning the availability of broadband in rural vs. urban areas, appears to be closing, according to a future-gazing report published today (6 April) by the new Commission for Rural Communities – an operating division of the Countryside Agency. This can bring great opportunities for rural people, where technology removes problems of distance and isolation, and helps rural businesses be more competitive.

The new report, *Beyond digital divides? The future for ICT in rural areas*, produced for the Commission by independent think tank Demos, shows that in September 2003 only 26% of market towns, 7% of villages and 1% of the wider countryside could access broadband services, compared to 95% of urban areas. Coverage figures from BT now show over 97% of the English population has access to at least one type of broadband, with a plan to reach over 99% of people by this summer. So, rural areas have nearly caught up with their urban counterparts. But vigilance is needed to ensure a divide does not open again as future generations of faster broadband are developed.

Speaking at a seminar discussing the new report today, Countryside Agency board member John Varley, said: “We’re very pleased to see the initial problem of access to broadband networks is now effectively tackled. Evidence suggests a significant demand for ICT and broadband in rural areas and these technologies could be especially relevant in the countryside, combating isolation and supporting the small and medium-sized enterprises that predominate.

“Today’s report emphasizes that it is no longer inevitable that cities will run ahead of the countryside in terms of connectivity and bandwidth. The patchy provision of broadband in the past has meant that some rural communities made great strides on their own to provide digital services, pushing the boundaries of technology and collaboration – of all communities these are the ones you would expect to keep up with, or lead, future developments. So, if another divide does emerge it’s just as likely to be between and within rural communities themselves, as it is to be between urban and rural areas. Indeed, more meaningful comparisons may be global, such as between the North York Moors, the Ardennes in Belgium or Bavaria in Germany in terms of connectivity.

“It’s now crucial that rural communities, industry and government build on the dialogue and joint work that has brought an end to the first digital divide and work together to understand how broadband can deliver an exciting future for rural areas. To ensure rural communities have adequate digital services in future there should be an annual review of their geographical coverage, to consider whether there is a case for further intervention, such as extending the universal service obligations (USO) to include broadband and digital TV services, or provision of incentives to address any specific and fundamental market failure.

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“It is equally important that everyone in rural communities has the opportunity to access broadband and digital services - there will always be a minority who cannot afford it. As technology becomes increasingly embedded in people's lives lack of access to it could lead to digital exclusion for some, which may in turn lead to increased social exclusion and this must be avoided. Internet access points in schools, libraries, post offices or village halls can certainly help this group. At the same time some people will choose to opt out of the digital world, so service providers need to ensure they don't fall into the trap of thinking that using technology to provide services is the be all and end all; and with some services it's only appropriate to offer them face-to-face. Only by taking all these considerations on board will digital, and wider, disadvantage be avoided.”

The report found that some differences in broadband services for urban and rural areas are starting to emerge. Already some urban areas have access to much greater bandwidth (up to 8 Megabits per second), compared with basic broadband (up to 512 Kilobits per second) in rural areas. This higher bandwidth would enable video-conferencing, which would be almost impossible on the lower bandwidth.

Beyond digital divides? The future for ICT in rural areas (CRC 04) is available from Countryside Agency Publications, PO Box 125, Wetherby LS23 7EP Tel: 0870 120 6466 Fax: 0870 120 6467

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Notes to editors

For further information please contact the Commission for Rural Communities - Nick McClelland on 020 7340 2038 or Julia Bailey on 020 7340 2032.

As a result of Defra's Rural Strategy, published in July 2004, the Commission for Rural Communities was established as a division of the Countryside Agency from 1 April 2005. The Commission provides well-informed advice to government and ensures that policies reflect the real needs of people living and working in rural England, with a particular focus on tackling disadvantage. The Commission has three main functions:

- Rural advocate: the voice for rural people, businesses and communities.
- Expert adviser: giving evidence-based, objective advice to government and others.
- Independent watchdog: monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

Further information at www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

Beyond digital divides? The future for ICT in rural areas was written by John Craig and Briony Greenhill for the Commission for Rural Communities. John Craig is a senior researcher at Demos. His previous publications include *Broadband Britain: The end of asymmetry?* Briony Greenhill was a researcher at Demos. Demos is an independent think-tank that works with policy-makers inside and outside government, and has a reputation for identifying long-term social trends. For more information visit www.demos.co.uk