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Rural Advocate visits superfast community broadband network in remote countryside

Rural communities face the risk of yet again being on the wrong side of the digital divide as the Government's plans for future superfast broadband take shape. Dr Stuart Burgess, the Government's Rural Advocate and chair of the Commission for Rural Communities is visiting Alston in Cumbria on 26 and 27 January to see how one rural community is already taking steps to avoid being left behind, by building its own superfast broadband network – Alston Fibremoor.

In his New Year strategy, Gordon Brown outlined how investment in digital infrastructure can help stimulate the economy. However, current plans for superfast broadband from BT and Virgin Media confirm that only half the UK's households will be covered. This means rural areas are likely to miss out.

Accessibility and speed with existing broadband networks still remain a problem in rural areas. A recent study by Ofcom confirmed that urban consumers receive average download speeds 15% faster than their rural counterparts.

Stuart Burgess says: "The future of broadband in rural communities is a serious issue. Ensuring they are not left out of plans for future generation broadband is critical. There are also important economic factors at play – for example, farmers will have little incentive to redevelop redundant buildings, for offices, retail or leisure use, if suitable broadband isn't available."

The Cumbrian parish of Alston Moor is one of the most sparsely populated areas of England. When BT installed the first generation of broadband it only reached Alston years after many urban areas.

This led to Cybermoor being set up, one of the first social enterprise broadband projects in the UK. Now, future development is being planned. The Alston Fibremoor project is investigating the aim of building its own superfast broadband network using fibre technology.

The community cooperative is aiming to make Alston one of the first villages in the UK to offer 'fibre to the home' in 2009. The cooperative will be laying the cable and the network will be owned by the community rather than a corporate business.

Besides offering faster, more reliable, connections the fibre based network also offers opportunity for greater public service involvement. It is hoped that, for example, public services like the NHS can have access to the network, enabling them to deliver improved services to the area at a reduced cost to the taxpayer.

Daniel Heery of Alston Cybermoor adds: "Social enterprise can deliver high speed broadband in rural areas at a fraction of the cost charged by big operators.

"In addition, we are using local contractors, managing them effectively so the money goes straight into the local economy not back through tiers of management and into shareholders pockets.

“Another key benefit of the project is that the social enterprise approach builds new skills and capacity in rural communities, while making the most of existing social capital.”

Stuart concludes: “I am extremely excited by the prospects for Alston Fibremoor. I look forward to hearing and seeing in detail just what can be achieved through the use of new technology to deliver superfast broadband. Local community leadership in upgrading existing services can also be used as an inspiration to other broadband cooperatives around the country.”

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Notes for editors:

1 The CRC was established in April 2005 and became an independent body on 1 October 2006, following the enactment of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act, 2006. The role of the CRC is to provide well-informed, independent advice to Government and ensure that policies reflect the real needs and circumstances of people living and working in rural England. We give particular focus to tackling disadvantage and economic under-performance.

We have three key functions:

- advocate: the voice for rural people, business and communities;
- expert adviser: providing evidence-based, objective advice to Government and others;
and
- independent watchdog: monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

Further information about the CRC and its work can be found at:

www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk