

DESIGNING THE BROADBAND UNIVERSAL SERVICE OBLIGATION

1 It has been my firm conviction from the outset that, as broadband has and continues to become essential (key word) to everyday life, it is everyone's essential right as a citizen to have adequate broadband access.

Without that right, you are effectively disenfranchised. Universal broadband is now as fundamental as the right to vote.

1.1 Currently, adequate and future-proofed broadband is a basic requirement for shopping, homework, distance learning for qualifications, healthcare delivery, engagement with planning matters (now entirely electronic), internet banking, business startups, DEFRA/RPA reporting or downloads. self-employed PAYE reporting to HMRC, access to government law and policy, farm/neighbourhood watch, job searches/applications, electoral registration, reporting to police, holiday opportunities, professional/union contact, software delivery (eight hours to download an essential upgrade this week!), medical appointments, competitive holiday businesses like mine (a must have for prospective guests), house values (a must have – see RightMove, etc) — and that's without discussing music, movies, gaming and other leisure activities. A kid who can't join in the conversation about the latest viral sensation is socially disadvantaged.

1.2 All this must be considered in the context of M25 Syndrome: reality adapts to fill and exceed available capacity. So, when the webmaster and their content-hungry clients start to design for a "national" superfast roll-out, those with "fast" service will soon struggle and those with "adequate" or "slow" will be dead in the water. I'll give it three years — absolute max.

2 A citizen's essential right to adequate broadband, therefore cannot be something sold to those who can afford it. The U in USO stands for Universal. Like the right to vote. Or be educated. Or be treated medically.

2.1 In my parish (population within 10 minutes of shops, 100%; within 10 minutes of surgeries, 100%; within 10 minutes of schools, 100%; within 10 minutes of mainline stations, 100%; within 10 minutes for fire/ambulance call-out, 100%; with available home hospice care, 100%; with telephone connection, 100%; with mains

water, 100%; with mains electricity, 100%), super fast broadband is available to 9.97%. Repeat, less than 10%. The other 90% fall somewhere under para 1.2 above — so will soon either struggle or be dead in the water..

2.2 In my parish, we have many people who cannot find the three digits per annum for a mains sewerage connection. Or satellite TV connection. Let alone a basic citizen's right to adequate broadband.

3 Noises about local people being prepared to choose to connect, to “club together”, are rendered redundant by the argument that adequate broadband is a citizen's right. (People don't have to “club together” to buy the vote.) But, in any case, there are always those for whom it is not important or is outside their understanding or needs. They should not limit the availability or raise the cost for those to whom it is important. That is why a USO on adequate broadband is the responsibility of central government.

4 Equally, noises about “community commitments” are a nonsense. If the “community” were a voluntary grouping, their viability and costs would be subject to para 3 above. If the “community” were the parish council, consider the fact that the total annual precept for my parish is £13k *per annum*, which is nearly double some of the neighbouring parishes.

A Universal Service Obligation means just that; you cannot have certain areas that are less Universal than others. So, for intellectual consistency, I propose that the government adopts a simple policy: Nobody should be allowed to vote unless they are able to receive a minimum of 10mbps broadband speed.