

Borders Broadband Project (Herefordshire and Gloucestershire)

Ofcom Spectrum Consultation

Welcome is the opportunity to contribute to the debate of mobile phone coverage.

Herefordshire Council, along with its neighbouring partner Gloucestershire, is one of the four BDUK pilots. As part of our work to bring superfast broadband to these largely rural counties, the concerns over mobile phone coverage goes hand in hand with broadband.

The mobile coverage is referred to in humour with the length people have to go to receive coverage (recently heard about someone keeping a ladder by the side of the shed in order to go up it to take a call). However, this is no joke for people trying to operate a business or someone who needs to contact people for their care needs, or a young person in an isolated rural community who uses his/her phone to be socially connected.

Also, in our consultation and discussion with communities there has been considerable concern that a target below 100% coverage means that inevitably people will miss out, usually those in the most rural areas. Therefore, there will continue to be a digital divide creating a competitive disadvantage for businesses and social exclusion for residents. I am sure Ofcom is aware of these arguments and as a result are trying to address the issue, but anything below 98-100% will perpetuate the divide between urban and rural areas. The technical revolution is the opportunity for rural areas to improve its economy and in so doing improve the lives of residents.

We are just about to release our PQQ for the Broadband contract. We are operating a gap funding model, where the focus is on the areas the suppliers would not consider for investment. I suggest this is a more "equal" route for investment as funds can be targeted at where they are really needed.

The mobile coverage would significantly support the work of the pilots and the wider geographies in aiming to achieve better broadband coverage and access. For the Herefordshire / Gloucestershire project we are looking for a blended solution that uses any technology available reaching our targets by any means. We have specific coverage and access targets by 2015, and therefore a bringing forward of the roll out of mobile coverage to earlier than 2017 would mean that mobile coverage is part of the solution, rather than a secondary consideration.

Natalia Silver

Assistant Director, Economy and Culture / Project Director for Broadband Borders Project

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