

OFCOM 4G CONSULTATION: NEN TECHNICAL STRATEGY GROUP RESPONSE

The National Education Network (www.nen.gov.uk) is the UK collaborative network for education, providing schools with a safe, secure and reliable learning environment and direct access to a growing range of online services and content.

Schools vary enormously in size and have a wide range of diverse locations. Strategies developed by Regional Broadband Consortia (RBC) in England and by devolved administrations elsewhere in the UK deliver fit for purpose broadband to schools whether located in towns or “difficult to connect” rural villages.

Schools’ demands for digital connectivity have changed and grown over the 11 years that RBCs have provided their services. RBCs have updated and refreshed their systems to meet schools’ needs throughout the period. As these needs continue to develop further changes and investment will be required to optimise cost of provision and take advantage of new technologies.

The opportunities presented by the forthcoming 4G mobile auction are therefore of interest to the NEN Technical Strategy Group and the communities they support. Of particular interest is the fact that the combination of low and high frequency spectrum available in the 800 MHz and 2.6 GHz bands creates the potential for next generation mobile broadband services to be widely available across the UK, while at the same time having the capacity to cope with significant demand, even in urban centres.

The NEN TSG welcomes Ofcom’s proposal that next generation mobile broadband services are made available in less urban areas, as well as in the more commercially attractive more densely populated areas. Ofcom’s intention that the next generation mobile broadband marketplace should offer competition and choice for customers is also welcomed.

Extending choice and access to broadband into rural areas is entirely in keeping with the NEN’s aims and objectives, providing further opportunities for remote learning via high-quality interactions between learners and their institutions. Reliable access to video services (streaming, videoconferencing) is particularly important in this context.

However, the NEN TSG recommends that 4G mobile services, while offering a potential mechanism for providing easy to deploy connectivity to individuals living in areas currently poorly served by the marketplace, should not be regarded as a substitute for the fixed-line services currently provided to the majority of schools.

Whilst mobile technologies can and will undoubtedly play a very important role in extending access to education and lifelong learning, schools’ and other educational institutions’ ever increasing demand for bandwidth predicates delivery of broadband via fixed-line services.

Further information on schools’ current and likely future bandwidth requirements is available at <http://www.nen.gov.uk/media>.

