

## **Digital Britain Interim Report**

### **Response from Digital Birmingham**

Digital Birmingham welcomes the publication of the Digital Britain Interim Report. In our opinion it has correctly identified the majority of the issues which need to be addressed in order for Britain to maximise the benefits of new digital technologies in the near future.

Digital Birmingham is a city-wide partnership designed to encourage people, business and communities to gain the benefits of digital technologies. It is helping Birmingham make the transition from an industrial city to a digital city by driving forward the use of these technologies in order to increase prosperity, knowledge and the quality of life of its citizens. Our executive board has many major local organisations and includes International and UK organisations such as Microsoft, Cisco, BT, Virgin Media and the BBC; leading players in delivering the technologies identified in the report. This response has been created by the Digital Birmingham team on behalf of the city and is not intended to represent the views of our individual membership.

So, we see that our aims and objectives are very much aligned with the work of the Digital Britain team and believe that we are uniquely placed as a local partnership in Birmingham to act as a catalyst to influence and implement many of the ideas which are emerging from the report.

### **Next Generation Broadband**

We welcome the action to remove the barriers presented by the current lack of access to ducts and primary infrastructure. Birmingham realises the importance of working with the major telecommunications players to bring the opportunities of Next Generation Access to Birmingham. However, it recognises the importance of having a neutral infrastructure which is available to all providers in order to ensure competitiveness.

One important part of the work that we are doing is establishing the existing ducting infrastructure in the city and we will be working with providers to establish ways of sharing that infrastructure. We are integrally involved in the major regeneration schemes in Birmingham, such as the Big City Plan and Longbridge redevelopment to ensure that a ducting infrastructure is created capable of delivering Next Generation Access to the premises. One issue we would like your final report to address is the current refusal of the major telecoms providers to share their ducting or utilise ducting installed by others. This restrictive approach increases the cost of delivery of a Digital Britain.

We are representing Birmingham City Council on a City Region group which is defining ways of creating a region-wide super fast telecommunications infrastructure and identifying opportunities for the aggregation of services which could sustain and deliver benefit over this infrastructure.

We note the inclusion of the recommendations from the Caio Report that investment in Next Generation Access be through private sector borrowing. With the current adverse economic conditions, which have worsened since the Caio Report, such investment is looking less feasible. We believe, with the government focusing attention on investment in infrastructure projects as a means to economic recovery, that Next Generation Access

Broadband would be a prime candidate for public sector investment.

Digital Birmingham believe that future home connectivity will be fibre to the home and not merely fibre to the cabinet.

## **Digital Content**

While noting the acknowledgement that the interim report is light in some areas we feel that the section on digital content needs a lot more work. The points raised around fostering creative industries are welcomed, and the active creative industries sector in Birmingham will be keen to participate in the development of policies and programmes in this area. We have a rich creative industries sector in Birmingham, one which Digital Birmingham have strong links and working relationships with and one which is at the forefront of innovative uses of digital technologies.

Digital Birmingham is concerned that the report's focus on the rights of copyright holders of digital content has the danger of stifling innovation. In particular we feel that the establishment of a Rights Agency and a framework of civil enforcement of copyright to be measures that will be potentially unenforceable and also create considerable overheads for Internet Service Providers.

## **Net Neutrality**

Digital Birmingham believe that the key to the debate over Net Neutrality is Quality of Service. It is sensible network policy to manage traffic to maximise its usage and to guarantee to customers that they can use the technologies which make net usage such a rich experience. We share the concerns of many that our current broadband speed in cities is aspirational eg up to 2Mbps and not a guaranteed or average level. This means the quality of service we expect from our phones and TV are not met by the internet.

We would be concerned if a telecommunications company's right to manage its network efficiently was to lead to a breakdown in the expectation that they will fulfil requests as best as they can. Traffic should not be given preferential treatment because of a commercial relationship with the provider of a particular technology, service or content provider.

## **Universal Service Commitment**

We recognise the release of BT from its Universal Service Commitment to provision of fixed line telephony as an acknowledgement of the obsolescence of this obligation. Digital Birmingham are also broadly supportive of the digital Universal Service Commitment to broadband. Like many commentators we are somewhat disappointed that the expectations are unambitious at only up to 2 M/bs.

However, our main concern is more about take up than availability. With the increase in usage of mobile phones we are seeing more people release their land lines and this has the potential to increase the digital divide both along economic and generational lines. Digital Birmingham would welcome any actions in a final Digital Britain report which

addressed take up in areas and communities where it has traditionally been low.

Digital Birmingham has been closely involved in a number of initiatives which have increased the take up of broadband in economically deprived areas of our city. Specifically, the Aston Pride Computers in the Home project which won an e-govt award last year and which has supplied low cost devices and connectivity through local schools, and now city wide as we work with Becta to maximise the city's take up of Home Access Grants and the positive benefits which we know will emerge from this.

It would seem that if BT are released from their Universal Service Commitment to provide telephony then there should not be a need for a customer to rent a telephone connection in order to receive broadband.

## **Innovation**

The pace of change of technology is such that we face the danger of protecting the vested interests of established players and, in doing, holding back the new, smaller creative industries. We are concerned that when talking about the market the Digital Britain report has an imbalance in favour of the large incumbent providers of technology.

## **Digital media literacy**

We welcome the attention to this key element of the equation for a successful Digital Britain. Our Digital Birmingham analysis focuses on **connectivity** (the first part of your report), **content and inclusion** (the middle) and finally **capability** including skills. We await with interest your proposals to enable the promotion and delivery of the skills for living and working in a 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge society.

## **Next steps**

We hope these comments have been helpful. We confirm our commitment in Birmingham to developing and delivering the Digital Britain agenda and welcome an opportunity to work with you to do this.