

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

DRAFT BUDGET 2017-18; BROADBAND

SUBMISSION FROM COLIN ROSS

This submission describes:

- practical effects of poor connectivity on local people, businesses and visitors
- exclusion of families, keen to live here, from activities taken to be normal elsewhere
- loss of productivity for small businesses and the tourism industry
- political and organisational failure to deliver a proven technical solution in the area
- inhibition on real progress caused by contractual arrangements with BT
- broadband as a key element in a sustainable future for rural communities

I write as Chair of Blair Atholl and Struan Community Council.

Our community sits at the geometric centre of Scotland, astride one of Scotland's principal road and rail arteries, yet many of us receive broadband signal strengths that, at often less than 0.5Mbps, are totally inadequate to meet either the demands of external information sources or our reasonable expectations to communicate effectively. We are part of a major tourist area with attractions as diverse as Blair Castle and the House of Bruar yet visitors must lose their accustomed connectivity as the price of their stay with us and the hotels and boarding houses they wish to stay in struggle to present the fast, comprehensive on-line offer that is expected..

It is not possible to open or interact with some websites, downloading large documents is absurdly time consuming (and, therefore, costly for business) and data streaming belongs in dreamland. Simple tasks such as upgrading the operating system of a mobile phone can require a ninety mile round trip to Perth. New small businesses do start up here, as a welcome counterweight to relentless population decline. They are often begun by enterprising people who have moved from elsewhere attracted by the quality of life the area offers though they invariably find their productivity compromised by slow broadband service. Many of us are served by a copper cable network that is around 100 years old, unserviceable and wholly inadequate to meet the needs of modern day communications. A few of us have access to mobile broadband: it is fast but it is expensive and data volume limitations render it relevant only to very small scale use.

Whether it is farmers applying for financial help (often only possible on line), businesses responding quickly and securely to meet client needs, individual households seeking to reduce utility costs by managing bills on line, children doing their homework or families, keen to stay and work in the area but wanting to live a modern life and share catch up TV together after a busy working day, fast access to the web has been written into all of our lives. Unfortunately for many of us in rural Scotland, it remains an illusive aspiration. We

are constantly sold images of the wondrous opportunities available when, in truth, we are excluded from them.

It has not all been bad news. Local businesses such as Atholl Estates, who host each year a major international sports event and bring significant tourist income and employment to the area, and private companies such as PGL, whose survival at Dalguise was under threat as a result of inadequate broadband access, have benefitted from local initiatives, funded initially by the Scottish Government and Perth and Kinross Council through Highland Perthshire Community Project. Unfortunately, inconsistency and confusion over funding has combined with some organisational shortcomings effectively to stall an initiative that had the potential to provide an effective, sustainable broadband service to most, if not all of us, in the area. This particular outcome appears to demonstrate a real lack of comprehension and expertise at all levels of government. Some details of the difficulties experienced in this case also suggest significant shortcomings in the agreement contracted with British Telecom, including but not limited to the failure to impose a universal service obligation on BT in return for the very significant benefits that accrue to the company, allowing it to manipulate individual local situations to their own commercial advantage with little regard to the needs of local people.

Both the Westminster and Scottish Governments make much of their target of providing fast (or is it super-fast?) broadband for all. Quite often such statements are quickly followed by references to 95% coverage and occasionally by truly absurd statements to the effect that perhaps not everyone really wants fast broadband so it is not necessary to provide it - meaning not always providing it for the difficult last 5%, that is to say people like us. The implication seems to be that, by happy coincidence, those few people who don't want access to broadband all happen to reside in the areas most difficult to service. The truth is, of course, that those in the challenging 5% are amongst the group that is most in need of real connectivity.

Scotland is a country that rejoices in its diverse culture and scenic beauty and which benefits significantly from the efforts of those living in rural communities who endeavour, under great social and economic pressure, to sustain our richly diverse environment. Surely the real measure of our national achievement should lie in recognising our diverse needs and genuinely seeking to achieve universal standards of provision for everybody. Providing ever faster broadband for some is easy enough because, in truth, it is driven by economic competition whereas providing good quality, sustainable broadband for everybody, really everybody, is hard because it requires real political will, organisation and investment. We can be pretty certain that the technology exists to make it happen. It is sadly less certain that there is unreserved, unswerving political will to ensure that it does.

Colin Ross
Chair
Blair Atholl and Struan Community Council
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