

## RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

### DRAFT BUDGET 2017-18; BROADBAND

#### SUBMISSION FROM DICK BARBOR-MIGHT

##### Introduction

In this paper, I comment on nine themes which, from my experience, I see as key in the deliberations about the future budgets and strategy for the roll-out of community broadband. I reflect upon lessons of experience. These bear on the position of HIE and CBS. In essence, I am recommending that there should be a strategic re-think by the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government of a system that, despite some successes, is failing many of us who live in the remote rural areas.

I have written about my own relevant experience in the final section.

##### The Consequences of Living with Ultra-Slow Broadband

The main burden of ultra-slow broadband for this household in remote, rural Rannoch, is the sheer time expended in carrying out the simplest tasks of emailing, googling and undertaking basic administrative functions. More complex tasks are more time-consuming still or impossible.

School children, trying to do their homework, fare badly. For older residents like ourselves the lack of proper broadband is embarrassing as we try to explain the situation to visiting family and friends. For people running accommodation businesses the impact can be devastating, given their dependence on city visitors - and their children. There may be fine views but why, visitors ask, is there hardly any broadband? This is added to the fact that mobile phone coverage is restricted where we live and only available through one provider.

We hear of people resorting to all sorts of stratagems to try and cope. For example: somebody running a small business is getting up in the night to conduct vital transactions; somebody is driving several miles to a friend's house so as to download a document or to enable Windows to download its upgrade when this would be impossible at home. Some households are unable to afford to pay for expensive satellite coverage so just put up with what little they can get from BT. Moreover, BT has no further capacity, on our tiny telephone exchange, to provide new broadband connections. Readers of this paper will be able to call other examples to mind.

##### Comments on Nine Themes

1. Budgets: Enough was said on 30<sup>th</sup> November to indicate that much more money will need to be allocated in the long-term, if not in 2017-18 then in 2018-19, 2019-20 and 2020-21. If CBS (or a successor organisation) is to take on a much bigger programme then it would be reasonable to expect that 2017-18 would be the FY when new capabilities are created while the subsequent period would be when budgets would be substantially increased and the programme greatly expanded.

2. Good practice and the need for improvement: The Committee and the competent agencies are looking for examples of good practice not only to well-conducted and innovative projects in Scotland but also to what is being done in other countries. There was particular reference on 30<sup>th</sup> November to Germany, France and Estonia. Other examples that spring to mind are from the Faroes, Cyprus and South Korea.

*The present system for delivering fast broadband appears to need either a considerable strengthening of the powers and capabilities of HIE and CBS or the establishment of a new organisation with an enhanced role and greater capacity and funds at its disposal. Either way greater legal powers are needed to conduct the contractual relationship with BT.*

3. Prioritising remote rural areas: The current situation is profoundly unfair to families and individuals - including to children and young people. It makes more difficult the securing of livelihoods and the flourishing of rural economies.

*I would argue that it should be a priority for the Scottish Government to ensure good broadband provision everywhere before upgrading already good services to larger population centres.*

4. A public utility: Broadband is a vital public utility and both provision and governance should be constructed accordingly. There is a paramount need for professionally led services and for economies of scale and with the attendant cost savings. These goals could best be achieved by having a single body for governance and a small number of providers with the requisite competence and capacity.

*This is not a case where 'small is beautiful'. Services cannot depend on the technical and managerial capacities of local people, who probably will be volunteers and who may or may not be present in any particular community. Rural Scotland should not be a patchwork quilt of broadband provision.*

5. Equality and affordability: Some urban areas as well as rural ones suffer from poor connectivity. Even when this deficiency is overcome by technology and the area becomes well connected there still can be the kind of core deprivation that was referred to on 30<sup>th</sup> November. Even when there are computers and skills some households may still not be able to afford charges in the region of £25 a month or even more - whether these are charged through a community broadband or a satellite scheme.

*Even when a project is carried through to successful completion there may well be households that do not benefit. Some element of subsidy may be needed to cover running costs and reduce the burden on households surviving on low incomes.*

6. Dividing areas between BT and other providers: In a recent article in *The National*, Lesley Riddoch exposed the practice whereby BT provides connectivity to population centres in rural areas, leaving the more remote premises to be connected by an alternative provider. I am personally aware of this practice.

*It is important that the Committee and the Scottish Government should take steps to find out how this practice works and how extensive it is.*

This bad practice may suit BT's corporate advantage but it does not suit the public interest nor that of households and businesses.

*The co-existence of two different systems in the same area, funded through two different income streams, makes for confusion, a lack of equity and a waste of scarce public funds.*

7. Access to private land for installation of a public utility: It has come to my attention that some of the Community Broadband projects require the permission of private land owners for the installation of masts and subsequently for their maintenance. I understand that in consequence some projects have suffered delay.

*If it is accepted that broadband is a public utility, it follows that an institution of the Scottish Government should be legally able to intervene in such circumstances.*

8. A regulatory organisation: Ideally a single regulatory organisation should be responsible for coordinating the implementation of Scottish Government strategy. It would be responsible for, among other things:
- the contractual regime for all providers, BT included,
  - monitoring and evaluation
  - ensuring that all providers have capacity and competence
  - ensuring that providers flexibly utilise the best available technologies.

This would be a learning organisation, learning from successes as well as from failures, and directed by a strong management team. It would make sense to draw into the membership of this team some of the expertise that has been deployed in recent years by successful community organisers. The CBS Director mentioned a few of these on 30<sup>th</sup> November.

*The purpose would be to institute and bring about change right across rural Scotland. This organisation would benefit from whatever can be done, notably by Ofcom, to deal with the monopoly operated by BT.*

9. Keeping the public informed – communication: A key task for the Scottish Government and its agencies as well as for local Councils is communication. It is crucial that the public, particularly in rural areas selected for improvement, be kept directly informed about options available to households and businesses vis-à-vis broadband. Properties in rural communities need to be kept informed about the plans of BT and CBS (or a successor organisation) as these affect them. The public needs to be told, in a timely manner, what options are available to them vis-à-vis connectivity. For example, what grants or subsidies might be available, what is the timescale of planned broadband roll-out by BT or other schemes, where can further information be obtained. Websites are important but not sufficient.

*It is important that this type of information be proactively communicated, for example, via a mail drop directly to households and businesses as well as to community organisations. It would be good to see a Scottish Government agency assume this responsibility. This proposal has budgetary implications.*

#### My Relevant Experience

I have been involved in detailed discussions about the delivery of rural broadband over the past ten months and attended the Committee hearing in Holyrood on 30 November. I have limited technical knowledge but have learned a great deal in recent months from talking with some people who do have a technical background.

I live a remote rural area, at the west end of Loch Rannoch, which is in Highland Perthshire. We receive connectivity from BT and experience very slow broadband speeds (0.4/0.2Mbps) with no prospect of improvement any time soon. I use the internet a lot. Being 80, partially sighted and living remotely this helps me to stay active as a writer and researcher.

A neighbour of ours has been informed that CBS does not envisage providing this postcode with any service for at least another twelve more months, i.e., not before November 2017. That will be three years on from when we first heard promises that we were to receive fast broadband through a community project. That project was aborted after eighteen wasted months in April 2016. As things stand, the only available option is expensive satellite coverage and application for a one-off £400 payment from Digital Scotland.

The conclusions I have reached are based on the following experience.

- experience of this household as a BT subscriber for both phone and broadband, including representations to the company about their charges for ultra-slow broadband and a protracted interruption of service
- discussions with a technical consultant to CBS, with a private sector provider (AB Internet) and with residents in two other parts of Highland Perthshire (Amulree and Loch Tay) who have tried, with mixed results, to secure fast broadband and similar discussions with people in Argyll (Port Appin/Glen Creran/Oban)
- experience with a community-based project (Highland Perthshire Community Partnership) that aimed to provide fast broadband to communities in Highland Perthshire: issues raised included serious concerns by myself and others about performance and the use of public funds awarded by CBS and Perth & Kinross Council (both agencies have carried out reviews, there has been coverage in *Heartlander* and *The Courier* and there is a relevant correspondence) ]
- representations to the Director of CBS, Zoe Laird, and to three of her colleagues as well as discussions with elected representatives, with the responsible official in Perth and Kinross Council and with Audit Scotland (this concerning their August 2016 report on progress with fast broadband)
- a preliminary scoping, in conjunction with a CBS adviser of the prospects for a fresh start in Rannoch for a fast broadband project

- My views have been briefly reported in *The Courier*. I have a background in public administration and have been a witness in a previous Scottish Parliamentary inquiry, into rural out-of-hours primary health care, during the 2009-10 session.

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