



The Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)

Consultation Response:

Department for Culture, Media & Sport Digital Communications Infrastructure Strategy

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enabling growth, in partnership

Key Points

- The Black Country LEP welcomes the opportunity to feedback into the UK Digital Communications Infrastructure Strategy. The LEP views the Digital Communications Infrastructure Strategy and the Science and Innovation Strategy as potential future engine drivers for a thriving, modern, attractive global economy.
- The Black Country LEP believes that Universal access to Super-Fast broadband is key for building economic development, business growth, whilst helping families connect more easily, leading to stronger and prosperous communities.
- The Government should also pay consideration to what happens when the UK is one of the best connected countries in the world. Having access to Super-Fast Broadband does not mean all will have the skills to utilise this resource. There will be a proportion of the population that will get 'left behind', due to a lack of basic IT skills / IT literacy. The Government needs to consider seriously how it will address this issue.
- To address the digital skills deficit, the Government must invest in a nationwide programme to equip the entire adult population of the UK with basic online skills.
- The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) has criticised UK broadband as being 'not fit for purpose'. It asserts that a major government and essentially the UK's broadband target is simply not ambitious enough when compared to other nations. When comparing the Government's targets for broadband speeds by 2017, in comparison to other countries, there does appear to be a clear lag.

The UK's target is 90% coverage by 2017 but at the lower speed of 24Mbps. Britain has a genuine, realistic chance to lead the world in this area. Fibre to the home is the solution which could be comfortably achieved with the necessary political ambition. The LEP agrees with the call by the FSB for a basic speed of 10Mbps for all by 2018/2019, and Super-Fast Broadband speeds of 100 Mbps for all by 2030.

- The creation of world-beating digital infrastructure that will enable businesses to grow, innovate and compete in international markets requires not only raising download speeds but also upload speeds that are so important and where provision is especially inadequate.
- The Government should overhaul its Broadband Voucher Scheme to businesses, primarily to improve the take up of the scheme, but also for its targeted use to reach the most hard to reach places within the UK. The LEP suggests:
 - There is a fast application procedure
 - Streamline the process, making it easier for suppliers to join
 - Offer the voucher scheme to business outside of the 20 cities it is being trialled in
- Government should consider the creation of a National Digital Strategy Board, which should have a mix of private, public and third sectors. This would ensure that future strategies take into account the needs of all 3 sectors, and it would provide a sense of impartiality from Government.



- Additionally, the Government should consider the creation of a 'Digital Services Authority' (DSA), which could regulate digital utilities, to ensure they are run in the interest of the public prompting competition, ensuring reduced prices to the public.
- Ofcom should use its regulatory powers to ensure that the entire UK is provided with reliable network coverage of at least 3G speeds at a minimum.
- Transport providers should offer reliable and consistent Wi-Fi across their services, allowing commuters the opportunity to work on the way to their workplace, further stimulating productivity in the economy. All public places (libraries, museums, Councils) should also be encouraged to develop and expand their existing Wi-Fi networks, offering free internet access across public spaces.
- The Black Country Strategic Economic Plan has already highlighted the importance of small businesses across the region, and the essential role they play in supporting key supply chains in key sectors, including: aerospace, automotive, and construction. As a result, the LEP is keen that SME's have access to SFB, and the skills required to be able to exploit the opportunities that the Internet presents to them, and their industries. To achieve this Government should set aside financial resources to help deliver this essential support.
- There will be a percentage across the country that will not benefit from the access to SFB. The Government should give serious consideration and find solutions to those hard to reach places that will not benefit from the digital infrastructure roll out.
- The key infrastructure questions for the UK in the future, besides airports, roads and railways will also be communications and technology. Future needs, and developments should be identified in advance and government and agencies should be looking much further ahead. It is important that this Strategy also links in with the Science and Innovation Strategy that is currently the subject of consultation so that future technological developments are fully anticipated, and addressed. This will help ensuring that today's 4G and broadband 'cold-spots' will not cause future economic 'cold-spots'.
- Setting up on a national campaign / or day which would promote digital skills to school children, and the population in general.

About the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)

1. The Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) will align activity across private and public sectors to create the right environment for businesses with a remit to tackle barriers to business growth and create a globally competitive local economy. The Black Country LEP is the first LEP to contribute funding under the new BDUK programme of Broadband roll out across the country , which has made this project possible
2. Programmes to deliver our Black Country vision are structured around three areas of activity:
 - Business: supporting skills and competitiveness
 - People: raising skills and employability, for example through our City Deal and Skills Factory;
 - Place: including the provision of more high quality employment land through our Enterprise Zone and City Deal.
3. The LEP Board has identified seven priority areas where action will have the most impact on the Black Country and its contribution to the national economy:
 - Exploiting the potential of the Black Country as a place to live, do business and invest; focusing on our housing offer, the quality of employment land, and the distinctive role of our four strategic centres.
 - Using supply chains to build business commitment to skills and growth
 - Supporting innovation at our major science and business parks
 - Building a close relationship with our top 600 companies
 - Raising our skills levels
 - Securing inward investment
 - Developing a more entrepreneurial culture
4. The Black Country located at the heart of the national transport network, comprises the metropolitan boroughs of Dudley, Sandwell and Walsall and the City of Wolverhampton. It covers 356 sq kilometres, is home to 1.14 million people, with 23% ethnic minority residents and approximately half a million jobs in 31,000 companies.
5. 'Looking Forward: The Black Country 2033' report released in 2003, highlighted the need for the Black Country to be a region of learning, driven by technology, leading to an entrepreneurial economy. A super-fast broadband is essential to achieve these goals.

For more information on the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership visit www.blackcountrylep.co.uk , follow on Twitter: @blackcountrylep