

Members of the Cabinet, Ladies and Gentlemen: thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak about the vital matter of high speed broadband provision – the first time I have done anything like this.

The government wishes to improve the UK's broadband infrastructure: to make superfast broadband available to 90% of the population and to improve speeds for the "last third" of the population in remote and rural areas.

Superfast broadband is now a crucial utility for both business and personal use. The internet empowers social interaction; it provides fast access to public services and health advice for the vulnerable; it provides television and radio to the public where freeview signal can be poor and cable services do not exist; it is crucial for promotion and development of businesses; it permits home-working, both for employees who are unable to travel to work and for permanent home-workers.

It is becoming clear that the commercial sector internet service providers will not readily roll out their services into rural communities. It is expensive and the higher densities of users in urban areas result in quicker financial gain. However, there is now a fantastic opportunity provided by the government to achieve the goal of rural broadband improvement: £1.43m is available for the South West Authorities to improve the broadband infrastructure; neighbouring Authorities have already taken advantage of this by producing local broadband plans and matching the government funds.

The current situation seems to be that urban areas are receiving improved speeds where the speeds were already fast. Rural communities are being left behind.

I live in Radstock and permanently work from home for a global publishing company as an online project manager. At my premises, the broadband connection is just fast enough to allow me to carry out my work properly (probably because I live near to the Radstock telephone exchange). However, this will soon no longer be the case as the demand for higher speeds increases. Other businesses and homeowners in the area are not so fortunate. Broadband speeds are very poor; freeview signal reception is unreliable; there is no cable television; mobile telephone coverage is weak for various networks; even VHF wireless reception is bad.

I believe that the provision of superfast broadband in Radstock and surrounding communities would revitalise local businesses (which are so often on a knife-edge); it would improve interaction within the local community; and it might even encourage the migration of workers back from Bath and Bristol through more home-working and new / revitalised businesses.

The local Radstock exchange is ready for superfast fibre-to-the-cabinet broadband. If commercial companies will not take advantage of this due to the expense of upgrading the cables to the cabinets, then it seems that the only solution is for BANES to match the funds that are available.

The first step is to produce the local plan, but it could then take up-to 2015 to finish the project. For this reason, I believe that BANES must act now, as our neighbouring Authorities have already done!

Thank you.