

## **Commission for Rural Communities News Release: for immediate release**

**23 June 2009: CRC 16/09**

### **Watchdog calls on Government to lead the way in bridging the gap on Next Generation Access in rural England**

People in rural England are at risk of constantly playing digital 'catch up' unless there is a firm commitment to improving communications access warns a new report published today (23 June 2009).

'Mind the Gap – Digital England: a rural perspective' contains a series of recommendations to Government from the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) to ensure an effective and sustainable communications future for rural England. The report includes an independent analysis of rural connectivity issues which is the first time this has been done for Next Generation Access on a consistent national basis. It is also part of the organisation's contribution to the Digital Britain report and identifies four key areas that it believes must be tackled as a priority:

- education and lifelong learning;
- business development;
- social and community cohesion; and
- equitable access to services.

Dr. Stuart Burgess, the Chairman of the CRC and the Government's Rural Advocate, comments: "The issues highlighted in this report are those that rural communities themselves have consistently told us they face when trying to access digital communications. I am very pleased that the CRC is taking the lead not only in publishing this significant new report, but also through its work on digital inclusion involving a wide range of stakeholders. I look forward to working with the Government and others to follow up on our recommendations which we believe will make a real difference to those living and working in rural England."

The Prime Minister said: "The Commission for Rural Communities' report is a timely and welcome contribution to the national debate on the future of Digital Britain. Digital technology in rural areas is helping businesses to grow, and is transforming

lives, communities and jobs. Access to the best technology available is as essential to rural areas as it is to urban.

“Universal access to broadband is central to government’s plans to deliver services and information, both nationally and locally. We must ensure that everyone is able to benefit from the advantages of new technologies both now and in the future.”

Minister for Communications, Technology and Broadcasting, Stephen Carter said: "The CRC’s report rightly highlights the need to ensure rural communities aren't left behind as the rest of the UK enjoys the benefits of digital technologies, both social and economic.

"In the Digital Britain report we have pledged to deliver quality broadband access to every home, every community and every business across the country, by 2012. We have also announced a new fund to help bring Next Generation, super-fast broadband to the third of the country that we know the market won't reach on its own. Together these two firm commitments will help ensure that Digital Britain does not become a two-tier Britain. The Government will do all it can to bridge the access gap for rural areas and we urge communities and industry to join us in that effort."

“Broadband is bringing social, economic and cultural benefits to rural people but, just as we thought the first digital divide was being addressed, new services and demands are putting increased strain on existing infrastructure,” says Graham Russell, CRC Executive Director.

“The Digital Britain report calls for the communications infrastructure to meet the demands of a modern knowledge-based economy, and this resonates strongly in rural communities. But providers’ investment must take account of social impacts and benefits as well as economic criteria. We recommend that alternative investment models for rural areas are adopted.

“Rural users are frustrated by the lack of speed and reliability of existing services. Those unable to access broadband are excluded from what, for a large section of the population, are now basic services. Digital technology can help tackle social and economic disadvantage in rural areas however. For example it can help older people

to improve their quality of life and support independent living by providing access to services, information and purchases and transform healthcare through online appointment and prescription booking.

“Rural entrepreneurs can aid economic recovery through the innovative use of new technology but this is dependent on infrastructure. Online education benefits employees, businesses and students and we recommend that institutions such as hospitals and schools in rural areas offer access to bandwidth to the wider community and new rural housing be designed and equipped to enable home working.”

Mr Russell concludes: “We fully support Government’s commitment to universal service at 2Mbps by 2012. Moves to fund Next Generation Access are also welcome, as we firmly believe that first generation broadband is unlikely to be capable of meeting the needs of a large proportion of rural areas. We recognise, however, that Next Generation Access is a colossal financial undertaking and likely to be more complex and take longer in remote areas.

“We urge Government to lead the way in bridging the gap for rural communities on Next Generation Access but recognise it cannot do this alone. We must all work together to ensure we remain economically competitive, with quality services and support mechanisms for all, regardless of locality. The CRC is firmly committed to working with Government and others to ensure rural communities play their full part in the digital revolution.”

**ENDS**

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Notes to editors

1 ‘Mind the Gap – Digital England: a rural perspective’ forms part of the CRC’s response to the Digital Britain report. The full report and recommendations can be found at:

<http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/CRC104%20Digital%20Inclusion%20Report.pdf>

2 The CRC was established in April 2005 and became an independent body on 1 October 2006 following the enactment of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. The role of the CRC is to provide well-informed, independent advice to government and ensure that policies reflect the real needs and circumstances of people living and working in rural England. We give particular focus to tackling disadvantage and economic underperformance.

We have three key functions:

- Advocate: the voice for rural people, business and communities;
- Expert adviser: providing evidence-based, objective advice to government and others; and
- Independent watchdog: monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

Further information about the CRC and its work can be found at:

[www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk)