

Westminster eForum, 9 July 2009 – priorities for Digital Britain

Speech by Anna Bradley, Chair, Communications Consumer Panel

My starting point is that from the perspective of consumers and citizens, the Digital Britain report is a very welcome step forward. The Communications Consumer Panel supports the Government's objective of enabling people throughout the UK to use digital services to participate more fully in society, and so reap the economic and social benefits.

The report covers a very wide range of issues and the links between them are not always obvious. This can make it easy to overlook the fact that the future could look very different for consumers and citizens:

- By 2012 we can expect to see 2MB/s broadband and digital terrestrial TV available throughout the UK, and more public services online.
- By 2015 we can expect everyone in the UK to have the extra choice which digital radio provides.
- By 2017 we can expect the rollout of next-generation broadband to 90 per cent of the UK and this would be a substantial improvement on what the market alone is likely to deliver.
- We can also expect to see the more widespread rollout of 3G and next-generation mobile services.

These initiatives add up to a significant package that includes many of the things the Panel has been arguing for over the last few years and particularly during the Digital Britain process. But in many cases, we have yet to hear the Government's detailed implementations plans and will be examining these closely to see that the interests of consumers and citizens are protected and promoted.

I'll now run through the main issues that the Panel has been focusing on and set out what we will be looking to see.

First, the **universal broadband commitment**. The Panel's recent research report *Not online, not included* showed that it will soon be essential for everyone to have broadband at home. But broadband will be essential because of what it enables peoples to do. The key test of success will be whether people everywhere in the UK can use the services and carry out the activities that they value, and do so in a reliable and consistent way. Plus it should be the Government's responsibility to ensure that 2Mb/s is available to everyone; it should not be up to consumers to show that they can't get it. And the universal service should be procured and delivered in a way that enables the level of service to be reviewed at a defined point and increased easily and efficiently. This review should take account of the criteria that the Panel has set out – the level of service should not become too far out of line with the average speed and should enable people to use the services and carry out activities that are important to them.

Second, the Panel welcomes the Government's plans to encourage greater investment in **next-generation broadband**. The Panel's work with the Broadband Stakeholders' Group shows that this has the potential to deliver significant economic and social benefits. But public money should not be used as a substitute for, or to subsidise, commercial roll out of next-generation broadband. It should be deployed only in those areas that commercial exploitation will not reach.

In the current economic climate, the proposal to introduce a 50 pence tax on fixed phone lines may be the only way to fund this investment. However the investment is funded, consumers and citizens will ultimately foot the bill. So the key question is how equitable is

this funding mechanism compared with other viable alternatives. The Panel would like to see the Government's detailed assessment of the impact that this approach will have on consumers and citizens. Vulnerable people may well be eligible for BT's social tariff, BT Basic. But people will not necessarily know this. So steps should be taken to raise awareness.

Third, **digital participation**. Making services available is only part of the challenge. We agree that there needs to be a stronger focus on promoting digital participation. This is a much better term than media literacy because it gives room to focus on the full range of consumer and citizen needs. In particular, the Panel believes that consumer empowerment should be viewed as a key element of promoting digital participation. People need to be able to choose and use services and equipment, as well as understand and create content.

The Panel welcomes the Government's decision to adopt the idea of a consortium to promote digital participation, and support it with funding for the next three years. We support the Consortium's planned social marketing programme but it will be vital for it to be linked to the delivery of services at community-level that are tailored to the needs of those groups that need most help. More generally, the Consortium will need to co-ordinate its activities with others involved in promoting digital participation, including the Digital Inclusion Champion and Taskforce, and grass-roots and community organisations.

It will also be essential for Government to establish a mechanism to oversee the work of the Consortium, including setting priorities and measuring progress. This would give the Consortium a clear focus on delivery. This role could be carried out by a steering group that would include the Ministers who hold the purse strings. But the best way of carrying out this role should be considered as part of the wider debate about the institutional arrangements needed to implement the Digital Britain report.

Fourth, **digital switchover of public services**. The Panel welcomes the Government's intention to introduce better, more convenient public services and this may encourage more people to engage with digital services, as well as leading to savings for tax payers. But to protect vulnerable consumers, there should be criteria that would need to be satisfied before traditional face-to-face services are 'switched-off'.

Fifth, **delivery**. The Government's vision for Digital Britain now needs to be implemented effectively. The Report shows that a complex web of institutions will be involved in delivery. This will require clear political direction and extensive co-ordination across Government.

The Panel's preliminary view is that there may be a case for a single digital delivery agency. This could enable a more co-ordinated approach, improved accountability and deliver efficiency savings.

There is a particular need for clarity about delivery in the Devolved Nations. Clearly there should be a consistent strategy for the whole of the UK, but actual delivery must use the devolved agencies and structures. Otherwise there is potential for duplication and confusion.

Government should also ensure that there is clarity for consumers and citizens about who they should contact with enquiries or complaints about digital services.

Digital Britain sets out an ambitious vision and the question now is whether it can be delivered in a way that maximises the benefits for consumers and citizens. And as I have said, the Panel welcomes the Government's plans to stimulate investment. But it should not be a case of trading off investors' interests against consumers' interests. The interest of consumers – and citizens – should be paramount.