

Digital divide – will it be demolished or deepened?

09 June 2008

The roll-out of Next Generation Access broadband (NGA), offering speeds of up to 100meg, will deliver new services and products across the UK that bring huge benefits to consumers and citizens. Some of the benefits will be economic, but many others will be social.

Today the Ofcom Consumer Panel co-hosts an event on NGA with the Broadband Stakeholder Group, the government's advisory body on broadband and digital convergence. The conference launches a major discussion on how the benefits of NGA can be assessed. A report prepared for the event describes the range of benefits – social and economic. It makes clear that these benefits will become greater as more of us access NGA, and that some of these benefits will not be achieved until the remotest areas of the UK are included.

If we address only the economic case for commercial roll-out of the new network, we risk deepening the existing digital divide: those who currently have slow, if any, access to the internet will not benefit and the difference between their services and those who benefit from the new NGA will become even more marked.

In her first major speech since becoming the new Chair of the Ofcom Consumer Panel, Anna Bradley said today:

“It is imperative that we face the challenges of delivering a social dividend by looking at ways of delivering NGA to all corners of the UK, alongside making the economic case for commercial roll out.

“If we are imaginative and utilise a mix of private and public business models, we could ensure the current digital divide is addressed and not deepened; giving those consumers currently excluded from first generation broadband the potential to leapfrog this technology and move straight to next generation.”

Some of the services that could become available include: telemedicine and other tools that would support assisted living at a distance, making it possible for people to stay in their own homes as they get older; two-way video conferencing enabling business meetings where more people can work more efficiently from home. “The internet has already brought about a revolution in informing citizens, NGA will allow us to break out of the current formal education structures and introduce new ways for people and teachers to access education materials and help life-long learning.

“We have a choice. Let's make the right one for all consumers and citizens.” Anna Bradley said.

Ends

NOTES FOR EDITORS AND CSEs

1. The Ofcom Consumer Panel commissioned a video to compare the consumer experience of UK residents who access first generation broadband and those consumers, in other countries, who are connected to an NGA network. The video can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=iiCEj0pKPto

2. The Consumer Panel was established to advise Ofcom on the consumer interest in the markets it regulates. The Panel is independent and sets its own agenda. Visit www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk for more information.

3. The Panel's members appointed by Ofcom are:

- Anna Bradley, Chair
- Ruth Evans, Deputy Chair
- Fiona Ballantyne
- Roger Darlington
- Simon Gibson
- Graham Mather
- Kevin McLaughlin
- Jeremy Mitchell
- Kate O'Rourke
- Bob Twitchin
- Allan Williams

CONTACT

Ofcom Consumer Panel

Dominic Ridley 07891724185

dominic.ridley@ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk

Sian Evans 020 8674 8921 / 07713997510

mediaconsumerpanel@ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk