WRITTEN EVIDENCE BY MARK ELDER

Overview

I understand that the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee is conducting a scoping exercise and will look specifically at:

The coverage, availability and uptake of broadband
What local practices are already in place / can be shared
What gaps remain to be filled by Scottish Government / providers to expand digital infrastructure.

This paper aims to highlight issues in Kirkliston, a village on the outskirts of Edinburgh which neither fits the rural nor urban categorisation well.

Background

Having met Alex Neil in October 2011 to help publicise Kirkliston’s issues I would like to follow this up with a more formal submission.

Kirkliston is served from the Newbridge exchange. The exchange serves almost 3000 residencies and 200 businesses. As far as I am aware only BT provide services at this exchange meaning no choice for residents. Although they can use other providers such as Virgin or TalkTalk, they do so via the BT Exchange and are subject to the same restrictions regardless of provider.

Typical speeds in Kirkliston are 1.5Mbps, with a peak availability of 3.5Mbs in very quiet times. Some residents regularly get less than 1 Mbps.

Kirkliston itself is going through huge expansion at present with work underway to build another 670 homes. Approx 120 of these are already built with work only having started in the last 9 months.

This new development is only going to add to the pressure. Despite the Kirkliston Community Council planning submission asking for fibre optic as a condition for the new houses this was not granted.

Edinburgh Council itself recognises that rural west Edinburgh are the only parts of the city which does not have speeds above 8 Mbps – Kirkliston is arguably the worst affected town in rural west Edinburgh.

Possible Solutions

Mike Crockart MP has met with BT who claim that it is not commercially viable to invest in upgrading Newbridge Exchange. They have failed to provide him figures showing how far short of break even this move would be.

TalkTalk are making noises about Local Loop Unbundling at this Exchange, but have failed to meet their target date of 29th November 2011 and anyway this would only benefit a small number of their customers.

An approach by the Scottish Government to BT and other providers would more than likely be successful. If some central funding or even underwriting were available then I am sure providers would be willing to invest.

In many ways the social demographics of Kirkliston represent those of Scotland as a whole but on a tiny scale. There are areas which are very wealthy and those which have high unemployment, but overall the desire for broadband is healthy and uptake will be at least as
high as other areas of central Scotland with upside potential based on our very poor transport links and lack of proximity to shops and leisure facilities.

Summary

- Resident access to fast reliable broadband in Kirkliston is very poor.
- Kirkliston is growing with another 670 homes under construction.
- There is little appetite for commercial upgrades to the Newbridge exchange without government investment.
- Edinburgh City Council recognises the area as being most in need of support.
- Uptake in Kirkliston will likely exceed expectations based on poor existing public transport links and lack of local leisure facilities, thus encouraging online activities.