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Bad news for rural Britain as digital divide deepens

This analysis is taken from Point Topic's [Broadband User Service](#) . Providing a detailed view of the current and future progress of broadband in the UK the service is essential for anyone with an interest of the state of the market and its future.

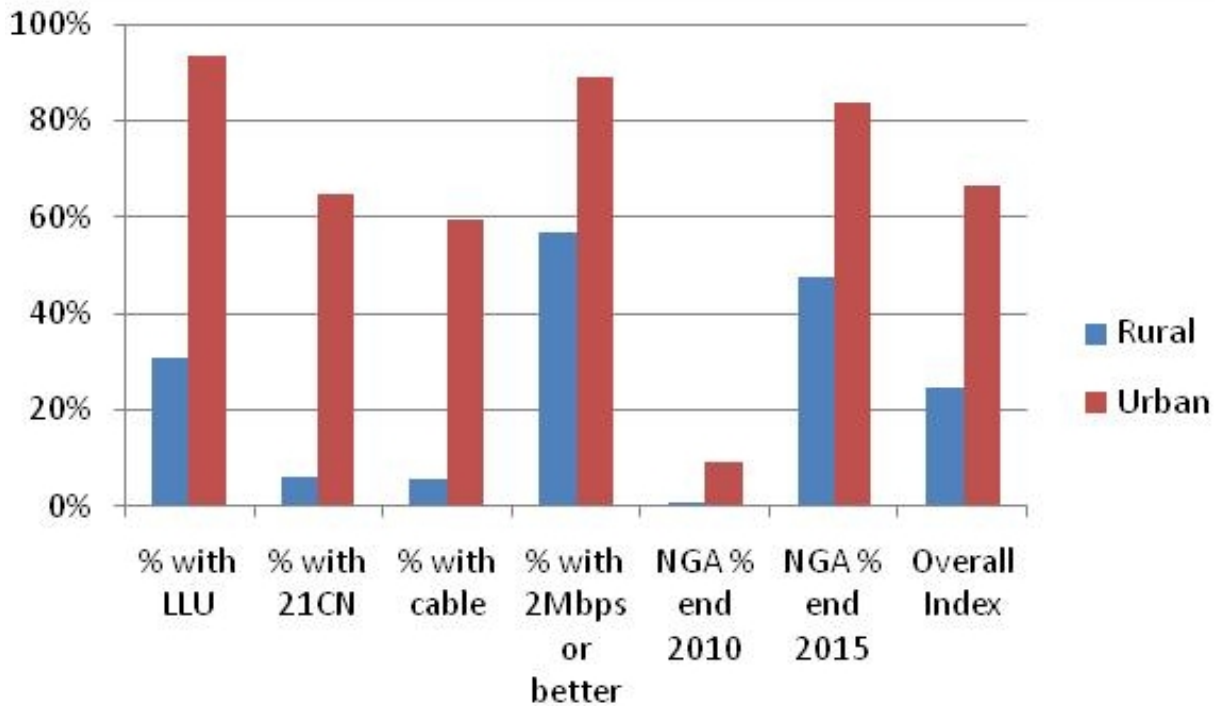
Plans to make Britain's broadband the best in Europe are in danger of stalling as the rural population of the UK falls further behind their city cousins.

This was the warning given today by Chief Analyst Tim Johnson of Point Topic, the world's leading source on fixed broadband, who was speaking at the NextGen10 conference in Birmingham.

"Our analysis of the rural-urban digital divide doesn't paint a rosy picture," said Mr Johnson. Broadband speeds and costs are very sensitive to distance and population density he points out. "The higher speeds which people will expect and need in future will simply not be available in the countryside unless radical action is taken," he declared.

Point Topic has used its database of the broadband geography of the UK to calculate the percentage coverage of six different measures of broadband infrastructure*, area by area. Rural areas are well behind urban ones on every one of them (see graphic). The six indicators can be combined to provide a single Broadband Infrastructure Index (BII). The urban areas of Britain scored 67% on this index as of mid-2010, the rural areas only 25%.

Figure 1: Broadband Infrastructure Index



As far as end-users are concerned, both residential and business, the perceived gap will only get wider over the next few years as demands and expectations for higher speeds grow steadily, doubling every two years according to many estimates. When 4Mbps becomes the minimum for good broadband as against 2Mbps today, the countryside will be even worse off because speed falls off so rapidly with longer distance.

Nor will there be much public money to bridge the gap in current circumstances. But Mr Johnson believes there is still a lot that both local communities and national government can do to bring lasting fit-for-purpose superfast broadband services to rural areas.

One thing which communities – from Government Regions down to villages - can do to get superfast broadband funded is to be very creative about the business plan Mr Johnson believes. He said: “Rural superfast broadband is going to bring huge benefits with it for many different parties. Local projects need to find ways of leveraging those benefits to finance the network, whether it’s by getting money off property developers or contributions for the environmental benefits.”

But none of this can happen unless the government also takes a much more radical approach than it has shown so far. “There are too many questions left unanswered,” added Mr Johnson. “How can a small operator deploy a network when there is a real concern they’ll be gazumped by a BT or Virgin deployment as yet unannounced? How can small operators afford to pay extortionate rates on any fibre they do install and still make the numbers add up? How can the county councils or the local economic partnerships get any funding or sign any partners without adequate information?”

“The Coalition has got to address these issues urgently if it wants to get a good broadband infrastructure in Britain,” Mr Johnson concluded. “Hopefully the broadband strategy paper to be published in December will make a start. But their retreat from tackling the grossly unfair fibre tax has been bitterly disappointing already. They’ve got a lot of ground to make up if they really want ‘the best broadband in Europe’ by the time of the next election.”

*Each of the six indicators measures the availability of a different feature of broadband infrastructure; local-loop unbundling (LLU) services, from ISPs such as TalkTalk or Sky, BT telephone exchanges enabled for its 21st Century Network (21CN), the Virgin Media cable network, broadband services of at least 2Mbps downstream, next-generation access (NGA) superfast broadband services as of end-2010, and projected NGA services for end-2015.