

## Draft rural broadband manifesto for the East Midlands

The critical importance of Next Generation digital infrastructure needs to be addressed within sub-regional strategic plans, structures and processes, whatever economic delivery vehicles emerge under the new Coalition Government.

It was agreed at the February summit that a '*rural broadband manifesto*' would be produced to help the region shape its approach to ensuring access to affordable, next generation, super-fast broadband in rural areas. *emda* agreed to develop a first draft, which would then be circulated to stakeholders for feedback. The key proposals, generated from stakeholder feedback at the summit, are below.

Whilst the issues and recommendations remain important, the changes since the General Election may result in a need to reassess the most appropriate courses of action, as well as potential roles and responsibilities.

## Draft rural broadband manifesto for the East Midlands

This document is developed from the key issues highlighted at the rural broadband summit in February 2010. Discussions with stakeholders gave rise to potential actions, subject to the availability of resources. These were:

Creating an **East Midlands Digital Forum** with membership drawn from local government, other public sector bodies, communications providers, umbrella organisations for community groups and commercial companies. This forum could enable the exchange of ideas and information to help shape broadband policy across the region, with a particular emphasis on promoting next generation access. It might also act as a lobby group and a forum for initiating/brokering collaborative projects which might include infrastructure investment; local pilots; the sharing of content and services; the resolution of problems relating to planning issues; identifying opportunities for aggregating demand; collating material for demand stimulation and research. It could also help to co-ordinate RDPE and any other investment sources. This group might logically be asked to develop a regional digital plan; ensure strategic coordination and learning around pilots; prevent wasteful duplication; challenge sub optimal solutions by pre-emptive education as well as peer pressure; help coalesce commitment to cross authority rural broadband backbone projects; identify opportunities and support for public sector aggregation activities; act as an information resource for members; support commercial operators who want to provide a service to the region etc.

Activities which might be taken forward under the Forum include:

1. **Supporting the 'Last Mile'**: possibly through an East Midlands Digital Cooperative designed to build on the INCA proposal for supporting community groups, as outlined in the Digital Britain Report. This would be a best practice centre, offering generic technical, administrative and regulatory expertise – for example offering a series of “broadband out of the box” solutions for last mile deployment (ranging from demand stimulation to fully fledged fibre to the home or fibre to the cabinet deployments); potentially offering advice on innovative funding mechanisms or other forms of investment and providing a shared engineering, maintenance, billing and support function for participating community groups. Some of the case studies highlighted at the summit would be examples of this type of activity.
2. **Supporting the 'Middle Mile'**: possibly through an East Midlands Rural Broadband Backhaul Initiative to take fibre as deep as possible into the rural network. The objective would be to encourage competition in areas of market failure by fundamentally altering the economics of last mile interventions through the reduction of backhaul costs. Schemes would operate as open access networks providing cost effective backhaul and middle mile capability to any communication provider or community group wishing to deploy a last mile service to end customers.

'Middle mile' solutions will inevitably be larger scale and require larger investments and more strategic development than 'last mile' interventions. Keen stakeholder interest is evident at both levels, and would benefit from co-ordination at regional level.

Issues raised by stakeholders at the summit which need to be addressed, ideally through a forum as proposed above are:

- A range of obstacles operating at different spatial scale/s are preventing [or slowing] the roll-out of next generation broadband. Work is needed to catalogue these obstacles and consider the appropriate solutions, which must be tailored at the right spatial scale and managed by an appropriately constituted body.
- There are issues around access to commercial data, infrastructure mapping and information sharing.
- There is a need for mapping of public sector assets and contracts.
- Need to address demand as well as supply; promote digital literacy and address any potential skills mismatch, to further stimulate demand and digital inclusion.
- Examine the case for supporting 'middle mile' solutions and/or 'last mile' interventions (dependent upon the funding and other resources ultimately available).
- Governance—currently no one body represents broader digital interests in the East Midlands. There is a case for a lobbying role and potentially a commissioning body/ies. Further work is required to understand what the appropriate spatial scale might be and what might be appropriate governance arrangements. Key questions to consider are whether the proposed forum(s) should be exclusively rural or region-wide in its remit; its Terms of Reference and how its leadership, co-ordination and administration should relate to emerging sub-regional governance structures.