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UK is slipping behind on broadband services

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The UK lags behind European competitor nations in its use of information and communications technology (ICT) because of the relatively high prices charged to access the services, a study of 154 countries has found.

The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) has developed two tools, the ICT Development Index and the ICT Price Basket, that allow direct comparisons of countries' ICT use and prices.

The index combines 11 indicators related to ICT access, use and skills, such as fixed and mobile telephones, households with a computer, the number of internet users, and literacy levels.

High cost restricts use

It found the UK was the world's 10th most active user of ICT, but prices were relatively high. It found among the 154 countries studied, there was a direct relationship between the price consumers pay and their use of ICT, in particular fixed and mobile telephony and internet broadband.

Slow uptake is often related to pricing, it said. This has implications for UK communications minister Stephen Carter as he seeks a universal service of "up to 2mbps" in Britain.

Ofcom said yesterday it will "ensure that any regulatory pricing allows investors the opportunity to earn a rate of return that genuinely reflects the cost of deployment and the associated level of risk". Further, it will allow BT and other large network operators to set their wholesale prices for high-speed links "to enable returns appropriate to the considerable risks of building new networks".

BT said last year it was prepared to spend £1.5bn on making 40mbps downloads possible, with a 15mbps upload service to 40% of the country's homes, provided it was allowed to earn a decent return. This was based on installing optical fibre to the roadside cabinets rather than to homes or businesses.

Hartwig Tauber, director general of the Fibre to the Home (FTTH) Council of Europe, a lobby group for optical fibre network roll-out, said, "All the network operators know the end-game is to install fibre to the building and to provide at least a symmetrical 100mbps service (i.e. both uploads and downloads) with quality of service guarantees. There may be some interim steps, but that is where we will end up."

Britain falling behind

Tauber was encouraged that Ofcom recognised the need for new regulation to encourage broadband investment, but he was disappointed by Britain's failure to make the top 100 countries with fibre to the home.

"When BT launched Openreach [its wholesale service], we [in Europe] thought the UK was ahead in installing next-generation networks. But it has not happened because the UK has been fixated on 2mbps," he said.

The ITU said worldwide there had been most progress on ICT access. This includes fixed and mobile telephony, internet bandwidth and households with computers and internet. Usage rates had grown much

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less.

"In particular, broadband, a more recent technology, still has to take off in many countries," it said.

The ITU expected broadband delivered by mobile telephone technologies to be a major factor in the short term. "Given the rapid spread of IMT-2000/3G mobile cellular networks in many countries, including in the developing world, there is a clear potential for mobile broadband to connect more and more people, and at higher speed," it said.

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