

'Fibre notspot' Scotland's digital infrastructure lags behind Europe

By Colin Donald

SCOTLAND stands "at the crossroads" in its efforts to reap the benefits of the digital era, according to the Brussels-based Fibre to the Home Council Europe.

Chris Holden, president of the industry-funded group, told the Sunday Herald that Scotland lagged behind the rest of the UK, which in turn lags significantly behind Europe when it comes to fibre deployment. He added that poor digital infrastructure is damaging to business and to Scottish citizens.

Holden said: "Scotland and the whole UK is effectively at a crossroads regarding choices to improve its broadband. Various technology options are available including wireless, copper, semi-fibre or complete fibre-to-the home (FTTH) networks, but any investment has to provide a future-proof solution. Only FTTH delivers speeds in excess of 100Mbps with matching upload capability that will ensure businesses and citizens benefit from the opportunities afforded by the internet.

"Why should Scotland and Scottish business care about fibre cables? [Because] Scotland is a huge fibre 'notspot', and even the delivery of standard broadband connections is behind the UK as a whole with only 61% of the population subscribed to broadband.

"Full participation in the internet is as fundamental to business today as the development of the electric power grid in the 19th century, yet our recent studies show the UK significantly lagging behind Europe when it comes to fibre deployments."

His comments were prompted by the publication of Digital Power, a study by the independent think tank Reform Scotland, which pressed the Scottish Government to prioritise improved internet connectivity and invest £200 million in broadband infrastructure.

Holden urged the Scottish Government to learn from the example of Hudkissvall, a remote region of Sweden, which, he said, proves that in a place like Scotland, seeking to boost jobs and new industries, the roll-out of fibre is worth pursuing. The roll-out of FTTH networks in Hudkissvall began in 2004. As a

result the region has reverse outward migration of young professionals and has seen the business numbers grow by 6% to 14% a year.

Holden praised i3 Group's "FibreCities" project, to equip Dundee and Bournemouth, with a fibre-optic network capable of speeds in excess of 100Mbps. But he noted that "an ambitious, overall plan for laying adequate fibre networks simply isn't present".

"Without a digital infrastructure fit for the 21st century Scotland faces a significant disadvantage when attracting inward investment or fostering its own innovative start-ups."

Enterprise Minister Jim Mather said: "Scotland generally has high levels of broadband availability, with over 99% of households and businesses able to receive a service as a direct result of Scottish Government intervention.

"While broadband policy is reserved to Westminster, the Scottish Government has carried out a significant amount of work to improve services. For example, we have been working with BT to extend the speed and/or capacity of 81 telephone exchanges which

were at or approaching their capacity for providing broadband services – work on track for completion later this year.

"Separately, around 2400 businesses and households are now benefiting from our £3.3m project to connect properties previously out of reach, using satellite technology. We have also set-up a telecoms stakeholder group – including representation from the main business organisations – to press for the best possible outcome for Scotland on reserved broadband infrastructure issues."

The Scottish Government is paying Glasgow-based consultant Gen £68,000 to conduct a survey of how businesses currently use broadband.

But IT expert Dr Brian Murray of Morse consultants criticised government expenditure on surveying business usage, saying: "Even if it makes sense for a country to invest in the new technology, it's never going to be driven by end-user demand. Most countries get this point, but readiness to do so is ultimately based on a society's readiness to embrace new business models."