ICT in Rural Areas

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Information and Communication Technology (ICT) will continue to have a profound impact on our lives both at home and in the workplace. For many people, ICT is synonymous with computing but the reality is that rapid advances across many fields of technology such as biophysics, materials science and robotics is leading us to a world of convergence where we can no longer distinguish between the technologies that shape our world.

This is a world where production is the realm of machines and people engage largely in the work of social enterprise such as teaching and caring . Whilst today, traditional ICT skills are a pre-requisite to jobs and to accessing commercial and public service, the exponential increase in computing power and storage, coupled with advances in display technology - the virtual reality contact lens will soon be upon us - will change the skills needed to drive our economy and our society. The worker of the future will need to be adaptable, responsive and have strong interpersonal skills.

For commerce, these changes will have a dramatic impact on the way we conduct business. Trade will be global and highly competitive. The winners will be lean businesses that provide quality products and services, that are reliable and flexible and that offer excellent customer service - at a competitive price. The fact is that globally too much product is chasing too few customers. The upshot is the development of the knowledge economy to harvest and apply intelligence to meet these global demands, to create these lean businesses. ICT has a very important role to play in facilitating this knowledge economy; and underpinning it is an infrastructure of high-speed digital communications.

For rural areas of the East Midlands the choice is stark: acquire the skills and communications to participate in the knowledge economy or see rural areas become increasingly marginalised. Compared to other parts of the UK, rural East Midlands is comparatively better connected than other more remote regions. The problem, however, is the same: In a free market economy, how can we ensure that the

market provides the long-term digital communications infrastructure that rural communities need? And this is not just ADSL broadband. This is ensuring that every household, business, and mobile user has access to the high-speed digital networks increasingly available in urban areas over fibre or state-of-the-art wireless links.

Such connectivity can help overcome some of the problems of rural isolation and of the changing nature of rural employment . The shift away from traditional agricultural industries to service industries, particularly in leisure and tourism, requires a skilled and flexible workforce. Industry-specific skills in rural areas will be increasingly acquired through home and work-based learning that requires high-speed connectivity and basic ICT skills. The growth in self-employment and contract working, together with the demand for flexible work patterns is driving the SOHO home office expansion and the demand for teleworking. Both will make an increasingly important contribution to the rural economy and neither are practical without access to high-speed communications.

And how are these rural communities to be serviced? As budgets continue to shrink, local authorities and others will seek ways to deliver services electronically that provide better customer service and which help them meet their statutory obligations at lower cost.

But the real challenge for rural communities will be how to work together to make the most of the opportunity that a high-speed global network can offer. Ignore the opportunity, and a community's ability to attract and retain inward investment, jobs, revenue and services will decline, as will the community's long-term prosperity and sustainability.