'Best in world' broadband for the UK will never happen unless the government stops pledging what they cannot deliver and starts fixing the implementation gaps that have marred all earlier efforts

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The government has announced that 'super-fast broadband' will be available across the UK by 2015. But is this just the latest in a long line of similar announcements, or will it succeed where others have failed? **Jerry Fishenden** *argues that in order for the government to deliver on these latest promises, it must close the gap between aspiration and delivery by focusing on better regulation, and ensuring that investments, incentives, and competition are balanced in a way that finally improves the UK's digital infrastructure.*

Another week and yet another government attempt to address the UK's failure to deliver a 21st century digital infrastructure. This week's promise from the Culture Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, is for every community to have access to 'super-fast' broadband by 2015. This will apparently be achieved mainly through private sector investment, with the public sector stepping in to subsidise areas where that doesn't happen.

All of which sounds oddly familiar. After all, in the late 1990s the Labour government made a firm commitment that the UK would become the most advanced broadband nation. This week's announcement contained similar promises from the coalition government, with a commitment that all this would happen by 2015. 2015? That's at least 16 years since the original aspiration, a damning timescale that better belongs in the dark ages not our current digital world.

Of course, the first question is what does 'super-fast' actually mean? Whilst I'd like to believe it meant any speed above about 24Mbps (and ideally synchronous, with the same speed available for both uploads and downloads), the government has not apparently defined its use of the term. Such vagueness is eerily reminiscent of previous government promises. After all, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, similar commitments were made. And during this time 'broadband' access appeared to rise very quickly.

Indeed, the '*UK Online Annual Report*' of 2001 reported that 60–65 per cent of the population is now covered by an affordable broadband technology. Which was perhaps a touch optimistic given that UK broadband penetration only reached 29.8 per cent in early 2010. The reason for such misplaced optimism can be found in another report on the UK's 'broadband future' from 2001 which indicated that references to higher bandwidth services included those '*at speeds greater than 384 kbit/s*' (and yes that is a K, Kilobit, not an M, Megabit). To be fair, even that report from nearly 10 years ago recognised that the UK needed to push to achieve 10Mbps and beyond if it were to remain competitive.

Meanwhile during the first decade of this century I was busy meeting with colleagues from South Korea and Japan, where high speed synchronous broadband of up to 100Mbps was rapidly becoming a reality. Rather than just talking about it, they also got on with delivery. South Korea now has around 95 per cent broadband penetration, which just shows what can be done when government policy aligns with an ability to deliver on the ground. Of course, I'm not suggesting that South Korea is directly comparable with the UK. But the UK's disappointing performance over a sustained period of time cannot be blamed solely on our more complex mix of rural and urban environments. It's a sign of a systemic and long-term shortfall between aspiration and delivery.

Achieving the government's ambition will require a challenging balance between competition, incentive and investment, particularly when it comes to the role of the still-dominant player BT. None of which is new, of course. The report '*e-commerce@its best*' in 1999 commented that: *'it is necessary to ensure BT's … roll out plans do not give it unfair advantage. A delicate balance needs to be struck between rapid roll out and maintaining competition in broadband services.'* It also recognised that 'there may be significant costs associated with delivering broadband access to rural areas – where it will, for most technologies, be more expensive than to urban areas. And providing cheap or subsidised access may distort private sector

behaviour, for example, by removing volume from operations which require a certain scale to operate. Clearly these costs and benefits need to be weighed up carefully when considering inclusive access initiatives.'

One of the oddest features of this week's announcement is the distinction between home and business premises. Apparently telecoms companies won't be allowed to offer fibre to business users, only to homes. That suggests some policymakers are dangerously out of touch with the way flexible, modern workforces, companies and micro-enterprises operate. They should stop planning by looking through the rear-view mirror, and take a look through the front windscreen instead to see the way the world is now, not as they imagine it to be.

The UK's poor progress towards genuinely high speed, synchronous and ubiquitous broadband has not come about due to a failure of political aspirations across the political divide. Indeed, today's politicians might be well-advised to question why they find themselves repeating the same dog-eared aspirations, and indeed the same words, as politicians of over a decade before. I wonder if Jeremy Hunt is aware that some of his brief is almost a straight lift of policy content from the reports of over 10 years ago?

If policy and aspiration is not the problem, what is? It seems to me that the UK's inadequate track record in building a 21st century digital infrastructure is largely one of poor market development, combined with an inability to deliver the political aspirations of governments of various colours. All of which reflects negatively on the role and abilities of Ofcom, the UK's communications regulator, particularly the way it has failed to manage an appropriate, and successful, mix of incentivisation, investment and competition – and hence the failed deployment of ubiquitous modern infrastructure on the ground.

The UK cannot afford to repeat the failures of the past: we are already slipping behind our international competitors. Having a vision and policy is not enough: government also needs the right mechanisms to drive effective delivery on the ground. That means making some hard-headed decisions about the role and capabilities of those, such as Ofcom, responsible for ensuring policy aspiration is delivered.

Unless the government is prepared to fix the gap between its own policy objectives and the way in which they are implemented, I worry that we may find ourselves reading another wordy library of government reports and plans in another decade. And asking ourselves yet again 'Why didn't it happen?'.