

Closing the digital divide, opening up opportunities

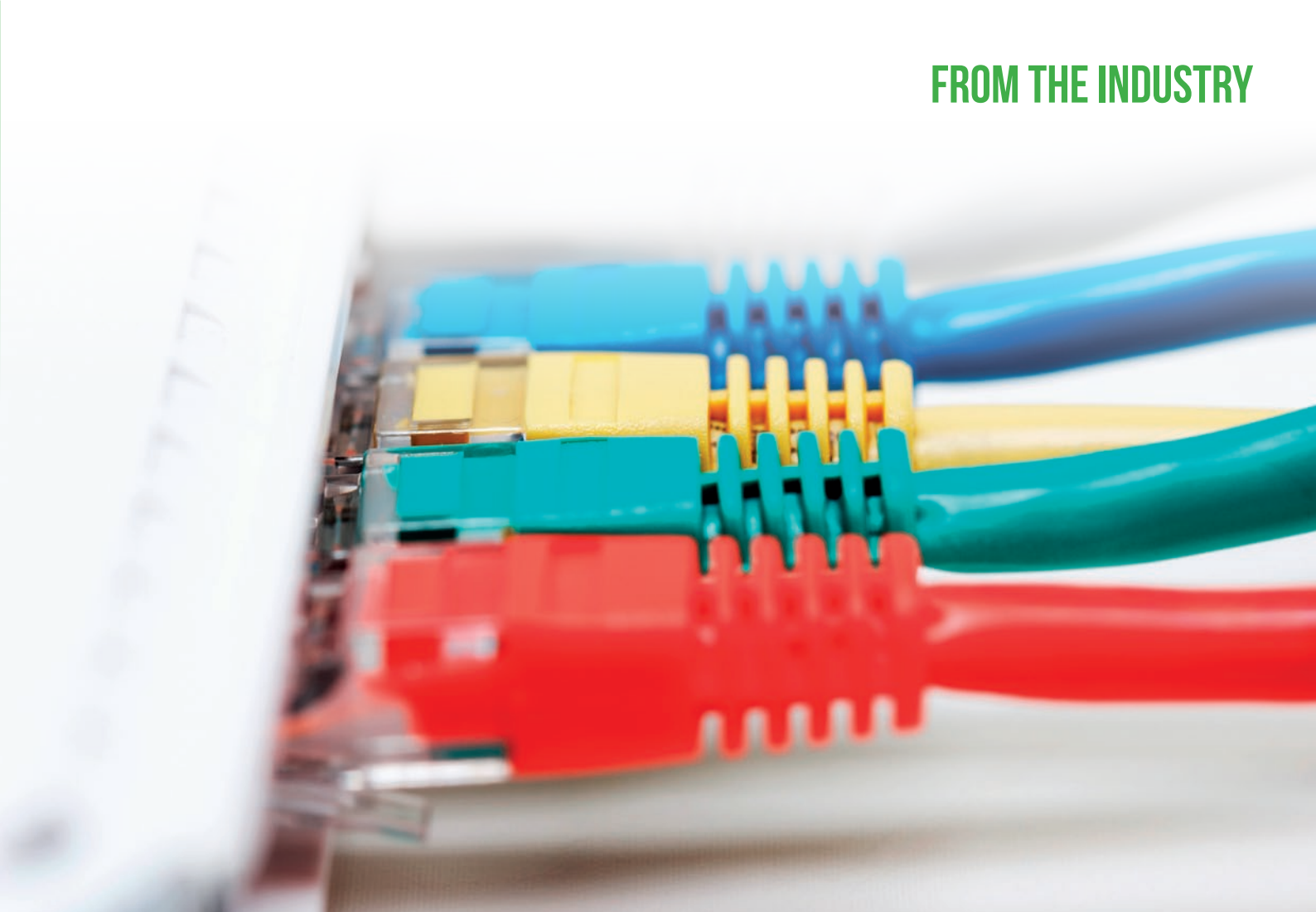
HOW CAN ULTRAFAST BROADBAND
DRIVE SOCIAL MOBILITY?

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SOCIAL MOBILITY, THE ABILITY TO MOVE FROM ONE LEVEL OF SOCIETY TO ANOTHER, IS THE LOWEST THE UK HAS SEEN IN OVER 50 YEARS, ACCORDING TO THE INSTITUTE FOR FISCAL STUDIES. WHILE THE REASONS BEHIND THIS ARE COMPLEX, LACK OF ACCESS TO DIGITAL TOOLS CAN BE A BARRIER TO OPPORTUNITY. HERE, GUY MILLER, CEO OF HULL-BASED FULL FIBRE NETWORK OPERATOR MS3 NETWORKS, EXPLORES HOW CLOSING THE UK'S DIGITAL DIVIDE WITH AFFORDABLE ULTRAFAST BROADBAND CAN HELP DRIVE SOCIAL MOBILITY.



By the time they turn three, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are on average nine months behind children from wealthier backgrounds. Unfortunately, this trend continues throughout their education. Disadvantaged young people achieve on average 1.7 grades lower at GCSE and are less likely to attend highly selective universities than their wealthier peers.

Even when less advantaged students excel and gain first-class degrees from top institutions, they are still less likely to gain elite employment than a more privileged student with a 2:2.

These attainment and employability gaps are testament to the worrying state of social mobility in the UK, which ranked 21st in the World Economic Forum's Global Social Mobility Index 2020, putting it below many other developed countries. Consequently, it proves difficult for the UK's young people to achieve better life outcomes than their parents. Why is this?

Limited social mobility can be caused by a range of interlinking factors, such as low income, low-quality schooling, the area young people grow up in and a lack of work opportunities.

DIGITAL DRIVERS

The digital divide also plays a critical role. As digital technology such as phones, laptops and broadband are increasingly necessary for educational and job opportunities, unequal digital access creates a gap where many do not have the means to effectively engage online.

The UK Government's State of the Nation 2023: People and Places report acknowledged for the first time the importance of good broadband connectivity in levelling the playing field and driving social mobility. The report stated that a lack of broadband infrastructure can discourage tech firms from investing in an area, which in turn limits productivity and reduces opportunity.

The publication also notes that median broadband speed across the UK tripled between 2014 and 2019. Access to ultrafast broadband has continued to increase since, as the government aims to ensure 99% of UK premises have full fibre broadband capable of gigabit speeds by 2030.

However, the report fails to consider the disparity in access to full fibre connectivity between areas with high and low levels of sociocultural advantage. This indicator of social mobility is measured by parental education and occupation, as well as professional work opportunities for young people.

Although regions with low sociocultural advantage levels are in greater need of the educational and job opportunities full fibre enables, they are some of the worst connected. A map displaying postcodes that are covered by any full fibre provider shows that many premises in low sociocultural advantage regions, such as the North East and the Highlands cannot yet access ultrafast broadband.

Even for areas that benefit from wider full fibre coverage, such as Hull in East Yorkshire, broadband prices have typically made ultrafast internet inaccessible for many. Ranked within the top ten deprived local authorities in England and one of the worst for social mobility, Hull also ranks bottom for internet affordability. This is largely due to the fact Hull only had one broadband provider for many years, resulting in a lack of competition and ultimately higher prices.



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DECREASING THE DIVIDE

So, how can we combat the digital divide to drive social mobility? With a recent Communications and Digital Committee report claiming the UK Government has “no credible strategy” to tackle digital exclusion, current methods are not wholly effective.

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Alternative networks, or altnets, could provide the solution. Altnets such as MS3 build their own independent broadband infrastructure which customers can access through one of the network’s internet service provider (ISP) partners. MS3’s full fibre broadband offers speeds of up to a gigabit to homes and businesses across the North of England — meaning customers do not need to sacrifice speed for affordability.

As MS3’s network is wholesale only, it is designed to support both larger and smaller ISPs. The increased competition that comes from additional providers results in maximum choice and affordability for customers. MS3 also offers all its partners the opportunity to take a subsidised social tariff for those end customers that need it most.

As education and job opportunities increasingly rely on digital access, the academic and employment outcomes for those without fast broadband are likely to suffer. Altnets that provide affordable full fibre broadband options not only help close the digital divide but open the door to opportunities for the most disadvantaged in society.

To discover the work MS3 is doing across the North of England and how its wholesale service operates, get in touch with the team.

www.ms3networks.co.uk