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APPOINT HOLYROOD MINISTER TO LEAD DIGITAL DRIVE, SAYS REFORM SCOTLAND

The Scottish Government should appoint a minister to ensure Scotland fulfils its potential as a world leader in the digital revolution, a leading think tank recommends today. [Mon]

Reform Scotland says the importance of keeping abreast of the rapid advances in digital technology warrants a ministerial team with specific responsibility for designing, implementing and monitoring a digital blueprint for Scotland.

'A fit-for-purpose electronic communications infrastructure must be at the heart of Scotland's social, economic and cultural future,' it says. 'It would be a core remit of the Digital Scotland Minister to engage all our public bodies to contribute towards a Digital Scotland plan and to create a platform for digital development which is both expansive and inclusive.'

In a report entitled *Digital Power*, the think tank says Scotland needs a strategy that caters for the whole of Scotland and is not just confined to the major cities.

'Digital connectivity is to the present day what railways and canals were to the first industrial revolution,' it says. 'But it is important that those in poorer or remote areas, who may already suffer from social exclusion, do not become further isolated.'

The report's authors, including former Head of Telecoms and Media at HBOS, Stuart Gibson, believe the cost of upgrading Scotland's digital network to the level required would not be as expensive as might be imagined.

'Taking into account available data and research as well as discussion with operators, consultants and academics, we believe a good deal could be achieved within a budget of around £200 million,' they say.

Although this is a substantial outlay, especially during challenging economic times, Reform Scotland says it represents only about a tenth of the cost of the new Forth Road Bridge and just a fifth of the cost of the Edinburgh trams project.

It calls on the Scottish Government to commission a detailed analysis of possible funding options, including private and European Union investment.

'In the context of Scotland's physical geography, situated on the edge of Europe, we consider that the investment in establishing Scotland as a competitive force in an increasingly global electronic economy represents a compelling case for prioritization.'

The authors say that despite requests to both the Scottish Government's telecoms policy unit and the industry regulator, Ofgem, there does not appear to be any co-ordinated plan of Scotland's current digital network.

They call for a comprehensive 'fibre map' showing ownership and current reach of existing infrastructure to be commissioned immediately and completed by the end of the year. This, they say, would help minimise upgrade costs through aggregation and use of existing fibre where possible.

The report says that faster and more widely available broadband speeds for both commercial and residential purposes are essential if Scotland is to be at the cutting edge of digital advances.

It adds: 'The active role of the Scottish Government and its agencies is at present mostly to promote digital awareness and technological innovation, but there is no co-ordinated digital strategy or plan to ensure that large parts of Scotland do not suffer from very limited or no access to Next Generation Access [NGA] capability.'

'If Scotland is to compete with other countries as well as with other regions of the UK, then, in an increasingly digital world, we must move quickly to develop a plan to build a fibre network across large areas of Scotland with enhanced copper, wireless and – exceptionally – satellite at the edges of the networks.'

'This will necessitate some public subsidy and choices need to be made over how public and private capital is deployed.'

The authors recognise that Scotland is 'one of the most digitally literate countries in the world', but warn: 'Not upgrading to next generation networks as quickly as other competitor countries could seriously disadvantage our economic and cultural health.'

Ben Thomson, chairman of Reform Scotland and one of the report's authors, said: 'What we are proposing is ministerial leadership in establishing a clear and ambitious strategy which involves much greater co-ordination in developing the various strands of digital policy and a phased commitment to provide high-speed broadband coverage to the vast majority of premises in Scotland.'

Notes to Editors:

• Reform Scotland is an independent, non-party think tank that aims to set out a better way to deliver increased economic prosperity and more effective public services based on the traditional Scottish principles of limited government, diversity and personal responsibility.

• Stuart Gibson is a consultant and former Head of Telecoms & Media at HBOS with some 20 years' experience in funding a broad range of telecoms and media projects across the UK, Europe and the USA. Stuart has spent much of 2009/10 studying the Digital Britain proposals and meeting potential stakeholders in a Digital Scotland plan.

A copy of Digital Power is attached.

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