

Fibre optics group calls for controls

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Young boys surf the internet at The Warrior internet in Abu Dhabi. Jeff Topping / The National

Telecommunications regulators should enforce minimum requirements for the speed and quality of fibre-optic broadband internet systems, a new regional industry body says.

Fibre-to-the-home (FTTH) internet systems, which can offer download speeds up to 500 times faster than the regional average, are being offered by telecoms companies and property developers.

If introduced properly, they can provide practically unlimited bandwidth to homes and businesses, allowing for simultaneous delivery of services such as high-definition television, internet telephone, games and ultra-fast internet.

But not enough was being done to ensure the systems would be able to take full advantage of new technology, said Faris Awartani, the chairman of the Middle East group of the FTTH Council, an international industry body.

“Service levels and quality are the key issues here,” Mr Awartani said after the inaugural meeting of the group in Bahrain this week.

“What we want to do is to work with regulators to encourage the right direction for this technology.”

State-owned telecoms companies such as Etisalat and Saudi Telecom are behind much of the introduction of fibre-optic cable across the GCC.

But Mr Awartani said property developers, which often build communications networks within new developments, and regulators, which are leaning towards liberalisation, were equally important in the process.

“Developers are not particularly concerned about technicalities; they are interested in selling units,” he said. “So we need to make the developers understand that this will help them sell units, because there is a high public awareness about these services.”

While telecoms companies were strongly committed to the FTTH systems, Mr Awartani said his group would look to help them learn from industry experience in Europe and North America, where the FTTH Council was well represented.

“Telcos don’t need convincing about this,” he said. “But what we have is information about experiences worldwide, engineering and standards. This is an area where we can really help them.”

Membership of the regional group consists mainly of businesses that provide services to telecoms operators. Mr Awartani’s company, Moseco, works on infrastructure projects for regional operators such as Kuwait’s Zain.

The two UAE telecoms operators attended the day of workshops that accompanied the new group’s launch on Sunday.

“They are very keen and interested, very focused on getting the right information and getting work done together,” said Joeri Van Boegart, the president of the European FTTH Council, which is the parent of the Middle East group.

Mr Van Boegart, who visited Dubai last year in part to build interest in the Middle East group, said fibre-optic internet rollouts were ideal for the economic stimulus plans being considered by governments around the world.

“It really is one of the fastest ways to turn stimulus money into real impact – economic and social change,” he said. “The benefits are felt straight away in so many industries, from education to retailing, entertainment, so many places. This isn’t just another kind of copper wire, it is a whole new generation.”

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