**The Panel’s National Stakeholder Hubs – June/July 2023**

The Panel’s National Stakeholder Hubs recently focussed on consumers, citizens and micro-businesses who live and work in rural and remote communities and how they access and experience communications services, such as landline, broadband, mobile, Pay-TV and postal services, in all four nations of the UK.

We commissioned research to further understand the interactions and experiences of communities in accessing communications services daily.

Since 2021, the UK Government (including all four devolved nations) have invested billions of pounds to enable hard to reach communities to access better broadband services. Their aim is to connect 85% of households by 2025 with the remaining 15%, mainly rural and remote communities, by 2030.

We invited stakeholders who represent the interests of such individuals to attend the Hubs with the aim of showcasing the Panel’s latest research entitled: [The Struggle for Fairness: The experience of consumers, citizens and micro-businesses in remote and rural locations in the UK](https://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/research-and-reports/the-struggle-for-fairness-the-communications-issues-facing-people-living-in-rural-areas-2023).

Futuresight, the Panel’s commissioned research agency, visited six locations within the UK. They launched their study in Exmoor National Park, journeyed to Northumberland National Park, then travelled further north to the Shetland Isles, before visiting the northernmost inhabited island of the British Isles, Unst. Rural areas around Oban, on the Scottish mainland followed, before heading to Powys, in North mid-Wales. The agency completed its journey in Northern Ireland, visiting Lower Lough Erne and Enniskillen.

Futuresight were commissioned to talk to individuals at different stages of their lives - students, young people starting work, families with different aged children at home, older and retired people and several micro-businesses all with various needs and experiences of communications services.

**Hub participants reflections on the Panel’s Rural and Remote Communities Research**

Hub participants appreciated the Panel’s research, which for some reflected the experience of the consumers, citizens and micro-businesses they represent and for others provided insights into the experience of those living, working and studying in rural and remote areas. Some of the phrases used to describe the video were:

* *“Articulates peoples’ experiences.”*
* *“Powerful video.”*
* *“The footage was compelling.”*
* *“Very impactful.”*
* *“The video should be shared with Government officials and communities.”*
* *“Details the importance of connectivity.”*
* *“Great to hear specific quotes from individuals.”*
* *“The information mirrors what we [stakeholders] hear regularly.”*
* *“5% of consumers in Scotland have no internet. These individual stories bring to life just how good or bad connectivity can be.”*
* *“The video completely hits the nail on the head with rural connectivity and the frustrations surrounding it.”*

**Hub participants discussed levels of connectivity and the issues people they represent face with communications services when residing or working within rural and remote areas of the UK. A summary of the discussion can be found below:**

* Good communication services are a lifeline to all individuals and their communities.
* Internet connectivity is no longer deemed a luxury but a necessity for everyone and is deemed on an equal par to electricity and other essential utilities.
* Many stakeholders commented on the many facets of fairness whether it be in relation to more individuals working from home or the unfairness of Communications Providers’ contracts i.e. paying for a particular service or speed when it is unobtainable within their area.
* The cost-of-living crisis is affecting consumers in all nations and stakeholders are reporting many people have little choice other than to eat and heat their homes rather than pay to be connected to a service even though it is deemed a lifeline.
* Many consumers are impacted with accessibility implications due to poor connectivity. Text to Speech (TTS) services on TVs and videophones (for BSL users) require higher network speeds, therefore those who require these services would be disadvantaged.
* Poor connectivity affects many other sectors such as education, finance, energy, transport, business, shopping and healthcare, as each of these heavily reply on fixed or mobile broadband to access services whether they be standard or bolt-on additional bonuses.
* Connectivity issues are compounded by lack of access to other services, such as exclusion from digital banking and apps on phones. Many local banking branches are closing and consumers are being forced to use digital services.
* Within other sectors consumers are pointed to use various apps to access services such as booking GP appointments or ordering repeat prescriptions from their local pharmacy. When connectivity is limited or fails, some of these services don’t offer an alternative solution which can cause extreme difficulties for many.
* A further concerning issue people are facing with regards to connectivity is the ability to have or obtain the required digital skills to use such services or have the know-how to apply workaround techniques to navigate alternative options. This is evidenced by the work on the [Minimum Digital Living Standard](https://mdls.org.uk/) work currently being undertaken.
* One stakeholder commented that people living in many urban areas also face connectivity issues in the form of ‘not spots’ and are faced with trying to work around the problem.
* Care workers within rural communities face difficulties when trying to connect to online services to ascertain when/where their next appointment is. The detriment to patients is a concern when healthcare workers are either late or miss an important appointment as a consequence of connectivity issues.
* With the migration to VoIP, stakeholders raised concerns on the ability to obtain emergency assistance during a power outage, especially as it may take longer for emergency services to reach destinations in more remote locations.
* One stakeholder provided evidence of a farmer who was unable to obtain a smart meter due to poor mobile connectivity which resulted in the business not being able to export their excess electricity generated back to the grid.
* Competition in rural and remote areas can be very low and many communities have little or no choice over which provider to choose as opposed to consumers living in more urban areas. This is compounded further when a provider goes into administration and the consumer is left with no alternative.
* Poor communication services impact the general and mental health of consumers with additional access and/or support requirements as they are reliant on other community members to assist either to access a connected service such as shopping or the digital skills to use a service.
* Many stakeholders noted the older age demographic in rural and remote areas and the reluctance of younger consumers returning to their communities following their studies at university due to poor connectivity issues.
* Many stakeholders feel the cost of living is higher within rural and remote areas across the UK especially with the cost-of-living crisis.
* Stakeholders are concerned with the uptake (and awareness) of social tariffs across all nations. This, in conjunction with living in a rural location adds to the detriment a consumer faces in accessing a connected service, especially when trying to upload a CV or search for a job.
* Participants in Northern Ireland relayed concerns over the lack of digital strategy for their nation compared with other nations who seem to have navigated the journey a little better.
* Concerns remain over the lack of working relationship between the devolved Nations and UK Government.
* Costs connected to courier deliveries and their inability to deliver to some areas remained at the forefront of many of our stakeholders’ minds. Many consumers had reported using friends or family members’ postal codes when ordering items for the ease of the item being delivered. They were then faced with travelling to collect the item when it was convenient for both parties.
* Most of the rural homeowners and businesses felt they were being left behind other areas of the UK with fixed and mobile connectivity.
* Our Hub participants had noted from the consumers they represent an increased resilience with online services, from education, transport, health, shopping and business, however they had also noted the widening of inequalities with connectivity.

**Stakeholders who took part in our National Hubs are listed below:**

* **Action for Communities in Rural England (ACRE)**
* **Advice NI**
* **Age UK**
* **Carers Wales**
* **Cedar Foundation**
* **Citizens Advice**
* **Citizens Advice Scotland**
* **Competition and Markets Authority**
* **Consumer Council for Northern Ireland**
* **Consumer Scotland**
* **COSLA**
* **CWMPAS**
* **Countryside Alliance**
* **Diabetes UK Cymru**
* **Digital Health and Care Wales**
* **Disability Action**
* **Farmers Union Wales**
* **Good Things Foundation**
* **Independent consumer representatives**
* **Mencap**
* **Money Advice Service**
* **National Association of Deafened People**
* **National Farmers Union**
* **National Federation of Women’s Institute**
* **Northern Ireland Trading Standards Service**
* **Ofcom**
* **Ofcom’s Advisory Committees**
* **Race Equality Foundation (The)**
* **RNIB**
* **RNID**
* **RSABI**
* **Rural Health and Care Wales**
* **Rural Services Network**
* **Scottish Government**
* **Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations**
* **Scottish Rural Action**
* **Society of Chief Officers of Trading Standards in Scotland**
* **Vulnerability Registration Service**
* **Wavelength**
* **Welsh Government**
* **Which?**
* **Women’s Policy Group Northern Ireland**

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**For links to research and insights shared by participants across the Hubs – please see below:**

* [Statement on supporting customers during the cost-of-living crisis](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/news-centre/2023/Statement-on-supporting-customers-during-the-cost-of-living-crisis?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=June%202023%20Newsletter%20-%20English&utm_content=June%202023%20Newsletter%20-%20English+CID_0f5862b559b08baff8bbc13c822155b1&utm_source=updates&utm_term=Read%20more)
* [One million lose broadband access as cost-of-living crisis bites](https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/about-us1/media/press-releases/one-million-lose-broadband-access-as-cost-of-living-crisis-bites/)
* [Investigation into BT following 999 emergency call service outage on 25 June 2023](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/bulletins/enforcement-bulletin/open-cases/bt-999-outage-june-23?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Ofcom%20launches%20investigation%20into%20BT%20following%20999%20disruption&utm_content=Ofcom%20launches%20investigation%20into%20BT%20following%20999%20disruption+CID_2c304fbd0db23e04879aba02aa860618&utm_source=updates&utm_term=launched%20an%20investigation%20into%20BT)
* [EE bolsters network with temporary masts for summer events](https://telecoms.com/522363/ee-bolsters-network-with-temporary-masts-for-glastonbury-and-other-summer-events/?utm_source=eloqua&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=SP_News_TelecomsDaily_NL_20230626&sp_cid=1808&utm_content=SP_News_TelecomsDaily_NL_20230626&sp_rid=6874295&sp_aid=2368&sp_eh=e521aefd5e41a2e8ed4604b50bb667f447964d533c28ffd7f480ad93aabcfc8d)
* [Ofcom plans to retain safeguard cap on stamp prices for second class letters](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/news-centre/2023/ofcom-plans-to-retain-safeguard-cap-on-stamp-prices-for-second-class-letters)
* [Smart Infrastructure Pilots Programme](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/smart-infrastructure-pilots-programme?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications-topic&utm_source=fbba300a-6e88-46e5-b916-613c685da6ff&utm_content=daily)
* [Advice NI publish research as Quarter of million ‘legacy’ benefit claims in NI set to be ‘moved’ to Universal Credit](https://www.adviceni.net/about/news/advice-ni-publish-research-quarter-million-legacy-benefit-claims-ni-set-be-moved)
* [The Move to Universal Credit: Get Ready](https://www.adviceni.net/policy/publications/move-universal-credit-get-ready)
* [Connected Hubs](https://connectedhubs.ie/)
* [5G New Thinking](https://www.5gnewthinking.co.uk/)
* [Project Gigabit](https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/project-gigabit)
* [Mobile Roaming Experiences of Northern Ireland Consumers](https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/policy-research/publications/mobile-roaming-experiences-northern-ireland-consumers)
* [House of Lords - Digital exclusion - Communications and Digital Committee](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5803/ldselect/ldcomm/219/21902.htm)
* [The Scottish Rural & Islands Parliament focus on connectivity in rural and island places](https://www.sra.scot/sites/default/files/document-library/2021-06/0.%20vSRP2021%20Session%20Recommendations%20-%201%20Gigabit%20Rural%20and%20Island%20Scotland.pdf)
* [Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill](https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3453)

**For more information on previous discussions across the panel’s National Hubs – please read on. You can find a summary of all previous discussions and see who took part on the Panel’s website** [**here**](https://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/stakeholder-engagement/the-panels-national-hubs)**.**

* In April 2023, or discussions focussed on **developing a Minimal Digital Living Standard for UK households and the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on consumers living across the UK.**
* At the start of 2023, we checked in with our stakeholders to understand **what they considered to be the top communications issues facing the consumers they represent in the year ahead.**
* In October 2022, Ofcom’s affordability team provided an **overview of its ongoing work to help communications consumers who are struggling to afford their communications services** and Hub participants shared insights from their respective sectors.
* In July 2022, **Ofcom's Market Research team provided insights from Ofcom’s Making Sense of Media programme, which seeks to help improve the online**
* **skills, knowledge and understanding of people living in the UK** - and participants discussed the findings and online experiences of the consumers they represent.
* In January and February 2022, **Ofcom's post policy team provided an overview of its policy proposals for the future of postal regulation and participants discussed consumers, citizens and micro-businesses experiences of the postal sector across the UK.** The outputs fed into the Panel's response to Ofcom's consultation on the future of postal regulation.
* In October 2021, Hub participants explored **what excellent customer service looks like and considered the benefits of communications providers developing a Customer Charter.**
* In June and July 2021, Hub participants fed into **our think-piece on making communications services inclusive and accessible** – [published here](https://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/news/latest/post/763-our-top-tips-on-making-communications-services-inclusive-and-accessible-for-all-consumers).