

The National Hubs' Debate - September/October 2020: Rural connectivity - the types of issues and impacts that rural consumers, citizens and microbusinesses face.

Access to digital infrastructure and a reliable connection

Some rural areas lack access to digital infrastructure and require affordable and reliable connectivity interventions across mobile and broadband to help rural consumers get digitally connected.

- Rural consumers in hard to reach areas have been further isolated since the pandemic and should be prioritised for connectivity. These consumers also face physical connectivity barriers, such as fewer transport options, so are also impacted by closure of retail stores and bank branches locally, with more need to access providers and banks online.
- Concerns that the UK Government's 2025 connectivity target and interconnected connectivity initiatives could be delayed. Key components to achieving the target need to be managed effectively to avoid delays.
- Rural consumers have been quoted high connectivity costs, including under the recently launched broadband USO.
- Many rural consumers experience slow broadband speeds and/or do not receive mobile signal in supposedly connected areas.
- In rural areas, access to fibre connections is limited and alternative connectivity options should be considered.
- Satellite and mobile connections work well in rural areas but unlikely to reach gigabit capability.
- Migration to VOIP is likely to cause issues for rural consumers in areas with no mobile signal who rely on landline services.
- Community networks and connectivity projects could help UK Government reach its 2025 connectivity target if funding and support were provided.
- Cross-sectoral coordination with contractors working on local infrastructure would help to drive down connectivity costs and avoid repeated works.
- Introduction of community-based digital working centres in rural areas would help rural consumers get connected.
- Infrastructure needs to be maintained regularly to avoid network disruption and lengthy repairs, particularly in remote, hard to reach areas.

Consumer awareness of UK and Nation-specific connectivity initiatives

Consumers lack awareness of UK and Nation-specific connectivity schemes and how these could apply to their circumstances. Inclusive information on initiatives should be available from trusted sources in clear, jargon-free terms.

- Low consumer awareness of UK and Nation-specific connectivity initiatives - information should be circulated using inclusive communication channels and

disseminated more widely via a trusted source e.g. consumer organisations. This would help to reach people who don't/can't access information online.

- Connectivity initiatives and associated costs should be clearly explained to consumers.
- A multitude of information on connectivity initiatives causes consumer confusion - it would be useful if consumers could easily understand how different initiatives align and how these could meet their connectivity requirements.
- False information relating to communications and connectivity needs to be tackled e.g. misinformation on 5G health risks.

Rural proofing in communications policy development

The needs of rural consumers should be considered at development stage of connectivity policies across the UK to achieve inclusive design and ensure that communications work for everyone.

- Rural coverage policies should be focussed on positive consumer outcomes, instead of target based. Targets across too large a geographical area can mean that providers are able to meet targets by choosing to cover easy-to-connect areas first.
- Communication across the UK Nations is important to inform policy development and help deliver connectivity initiatives.
- National policies should undergo 'rural-proofing' - a practice previously used in policy development, to ensure that policies work for all areas and mitigation measures are put in place where impacts could be detrimental.
- Connectivity initiatives should be designed inclusively, and gigabit capable internet achieved via a multiplicity of initiatives.
- The 'goal posts' of what is deemed a 'good connection' are likely to move in future and policies should be future-proofed.

People who have additional support needs or are vulnerable

People who are in vulnerable circumstances need to be safeguarded in the communications sector, particularly where lack of digital access can have detrimental effects.

- D/deaf consumers face barriers to communication and in some cases pay a premium to be able to communicate effectively such as paying for a more expensive broadband tariff to ensure a fast, reliable WiFi connection to access Text Relay services or an online BSL interpreter.
- Virtual triaging in healthcare means that the impacts and intervention opportunities of face-to-face meetings are missed e.g. healthcare workers trained to spot victims of abuse such as scams and domestic abuse, are missing opportunities to observe patients' non-verbal cues.
- Concerns for emotional wellbeing in a digital world particularly for older people, if the social aspect of life is eliminated e.g. visiting the bank.
- Many people who are D/deaf or have a hearing loss rely on Relay UK which requires good Wi-Fi or mobile connectivity so that the user is able to follow the captions and

keep up with the conversation. This becomes an issue for older consumers living in rural areas who are more likely to have a hearing loss. (In a subsequent meeting with deaf stakeholders, the Panel Member for England was advised that the text relay/Relay UK service is not fit for deaf users and needs reviewing).

- Consumers need to be proactive and engaged to seek connectivity and a good package. Those who are disengaged and in vulnerable circumstances need protections to avoid any detriment.

Digital exclusion

Some consumers and microbusinesses in rural areas lack a choice of provider, may be socially isolated and are at risk of being left behind. The pandemic has highlighted that digital access is essential and consumers who are digitally excluded need additional protections.

- Since the pandemic, digital connectivity has become essential particularly for consumers working from home. In rural areas, many consumers have experienced poor or no connectivity with potentially significant consequences e.g. healthcare workers being unable to conduct virtual appointments, workers unable to access online training.
- Small businesses should be able to take advantage of shifting to a digital world and e-commerce opportunities.
- During the pandemic, UK Government provided laptops/routers to the most deprived pupils to enable access to education, however this would not have helped pupils in areas with poor or no connection.
- Consumers should not be excluded from access to digital due to affordability issues e.g. not being able to afford digital equipment or services.
- Many areas only have one choice of provider, impacting consumers' ability to choose a competitive package/service.
- Public services are moving online whilst many rural communities lack connectivity and are disadvantaged as a result.
- Covid-19 has propelled consumers into the digital world and those who cannot gain access need safeguarding.
- Digitally excluded consumers cannot access greater opportunities for health development e.g. online consultations.
- During the pandemic, consumers with no digital connection have been unable to access critical services e.g. healthcare, education, shopping.
- Local authorities in rural areas with poor or no connectivity should receive additional funding to help citizens gain digital skills, small businesses access e-commerce support; and improve transport links for disconnected consumers.
- Bank closures will result in digitally excluded consumers travelling long distances to access cash - this will affect a large number of older people living in rural areas who rely on cash, and businesses that do not take digital payments.

- Digital access will enable younger people in rural areas to access education and jobs online meaning greater choice and opportunities.
- Working from home can also have positive outcomes including environmental benefits; healthy lifestyle changes; and businesses moving into rural areas.

Digital skills

Not all consumers with access to digital possess knowledge of how to utilise its capabilities. Upskilling is essential to help consumers digitally transition.

- Since the pandemic, consumers, citizens and micro-businesses have been forced to move online by either working from home or moving businesses online - many of whom need upskilling.
- The national economy could benefit by providing the rural economy with digital skills and connectivity.¹
- People who remain disengaged with the digital world need to receive communications from their communications providers (and other agencies) via alternative channels.

UK and Nation-specific connectivity initiatives

<p>UK*</p> <p>*Connectivity initiatives available across the Nations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadband USO: Click here for more information • Shared Rural Network: Click here for more information • DCMS gigabit voucher scheme: Click here for more information • Superfast broadband rollout: Click here for more information • Local full fibre Networks programme: Click here for more information
<p>Wales</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further Fibre rollout: Click here for more information • Access Broadband Cymru: Click here for more information • DCMS gigabit voucher scheme with Welsh Government top-up - Click here for more information • Local Broadband Fund: Click here for more information
<p>Scotland</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • R100 programme: Click here for more information • Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme: Click here for more information • Scottish 4G infill programme: Click here for more information • Scotland 5G Centre: Click here for more information
<p>Northern Ireland</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project Stratum: Click here for more information • Full Fibre Northern Ireland: Click here for more information

¹ [Rural England research: Unlocking digital potential of rural areas across the UK](#)

Stakeholders who contributed to the discussions are listed below.

- Advice Northern Ireland
- Advice Direct Scotland
- Age UK
- Carers Wales
- Carmarthen Association of Voluntary Organisations
- Centre for Rural Economy
- Ceredigion County Council
- Citizens Advice Scotland
- Country Land and Business Association
- Competition and Markets Authority
- Consumer Council for Northern Ireland
- Countryside Alliance
- Deaf Scotland
- Department of the Economy Northern Ireland
- Farmers' Union Wales
- Federation of Small Businesses
- Independent consumer representatives
- Local Government Digital Office
- Menterbusnes
- National Association of Deafened People
- National Farmers Union
- NHS Wales Informatics Service
- Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action
- Ofcom Advisory Committees
- Older People's Commissioner Wales
- The Race Equality Foundation
- QMU Dispute Resolution Centre
- Royal National Institute of Blind People
- The Rural Community Network
- Rural Health and Care Wales
- Rural Services Network
- Scottish Government
- Scottish Rural Action
- Senedd Cymru - Welsh Parliament
- Society of Chief Officers of Trading Standards in Scotland
- Ulster Farmers' Union
- WCVA
- Welsh Government
- Which?