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Rural Connectivity Seminar 26 February 2025

Summary

The Rural Connectivity Seminar, organised by the Rural Services Network, focused on addressing connectivity challenges in rural areas through presentations and discussions on mobile coverage mapping, data collection, and policy initiatives. The seminar highlighted significant disparities between reported and actual mobile coverage in rural areas, with experts presenting findings from large-scale connectivity studies and discussing potential solutions through collaboration between local authorities, government bodies, and service providers. The conversation ended with discussions on digital inclusion, emphasising the importance of accurate data collection, proper funding allocation, and the need for targeted approaches to address the unique challenges faced by rural communities in accessing digital services.

Introduction

Kerry Booth, Chief Executive opened the session and explained the Rural Services Network is a membership body campaigning for fairer funding for public rural services. Kerry highlighted the disparity in funding between urban and rural councils, with urban councils receiving 40% more in government spending power per head than rural councils. Kerry emphasised the importance of improving digital connectivity in rural areas, as it impacts access to services and daily life.

Rural Mobile Connectivity Mapping Project

Matt Smith, River Severn Partnership Advanced Wireless and George Gibson, Streetwave, presented their work on mapping mobile connectivity in rural areas, focusing on a large-scale project by the River Severn Partnership covering seven counties. They explained that while mobile operators and Ofcom report high coverage rates (98-99%) across the UK, actual rural connectivity experiences are often much worse than reported because the data is largely modelled rather than measured. The River Severn Partnership, funded by DSIT as one of ten 5G innovation regions, is conducting the UK's largest independent mobile coverage study by equipping waste collection vehicles with survey equipment to measure actual signal strength across 20,000 kilometres of roads, collecting 6 million data points from multiple mobile operators.

Mobile Coverage Data Collection Limitations

Matt discussed the data collection process for measuring mobile coverage, emphasising the use of real-world data and the measurement of optimal generation rather than all generations simultaneously. He highlighted the limitations of the approach, such as not measuring indoor coverage and the potential impact of seasonal changes and the Faraday effect. George presented the results of the survey, showing a significant disparity between Ofcom's predicted coverage and the actual data collected. The data revealed that many postcodes in rural areas have no signal from any of the operators, contradicting Ofcom's official data. The economic impact of this poor coverage was also discussed, with a focus on the loss of productivity and its potential effect on the UK's economy.

Sharing Data for Better Decision-Making

The seminar discussed the importance of sharing data with the public and local authorities to empower better decision-making regarding network availability. Cllr Thornton suggested a campaign using a picture of someone juggling four phones to highlight the impracticality of having multiple phone

contracts. Cllr Davis suggested sharing data with the regulator to improve policy and coverage in rural areas.

Rural Connectivity Progress and Future Plans

Matilda Rogers, Head of Rural Connectivity at DfT, provided an update on the digital inclusion action plan and the ongoing spending review, which is expected to conclude in June. Matilda also focused on the progress and future plans for rural connectivity in the UK. The government is committed to investing in long-term growth and has outlined a mission-led approach. The Project Gigabit program aims to roll out gigabit-capable broadband nationwide by 2030, targeting hard-to-reach premises. The program has made significant progress, with 86% of the UK now having access to gigabit-capable broadband. The government is also working on improving mobile coverage reporting and is committed to ensuring the right policy and regulatory framework to support investment and competition in 5G. The government is also exploring alternative technologies for very hard-to-reach areas and is reviewing the broadband universal service obligation. The Product Security and Telecommunications Act 2022 is expected to help deliver the benefits of advanced digital connectivity.

Broadband Project Progress and Challenges

Matilda discussed the progress of the broadband project, acknowledging the need for improvement in measuring and reporting data. She recognised the challenges faced by rural areas and the need for a balance between achieving targets and ensuring proper installation. Cllr Thornton expressed concerns about the quality of work by broadband companies, suggesting caution in giving them more power. Graham Biggs, RSN Policy Advisor asked about the use of data presented earlier, and Matilda assured him that it would be used to improve the project. Nora Corkery, Devon Communities Together, inquired about the extent of cross-government departmental work on digital inclusion, and Matilda confirmed that they work closely with other departments to address the issue.

Digital Equity and Connectivity Discussion

Daniel Gale, Digital Equity Manager and Lauren Wood, Digital and Technology Navigator at Gloucestershire Rural Community Council shared experiences and insights on the topic. Lauren highlighted the importance of grassroots data and hyperlocal digital support drop-ins. She also shared case studies of individuals who benefited from her support, emphasising the need for digital empowerment, especially for vulnerable populations. Dan discussed the North Coast digital and technology inclusion, social prescribing link work, which enabled community members to engage remotely into healthcare. He mentioned the distribution of over 27,000 SIM Cards and 1,500 devices, as well as the development of a countywide data lake and mesh system for sharing data. He also highlighted the Rustic project, which focuses on digital transitions in rural districts, and the Acorn project, which aims to upskill voluntary and community organisations and use grassroots data to influence policy.

Rural Community Funding and Data Challenges

The meeting focused on the need for funding and resources to address the unique challenges faced by rural communities. The participants emphasised the importance of understanding data at a local level to effectively meet the needs of these communities. They discussed the complexities of rural living, including aging populations, lack of access to transport, and varying populations at different times of the year. The meeting also highlighted the need for bespoke roles and funding to meet the specific needs of rural communities. Participants discussed the challenges of relying on data from urban areas and the need for more targeted data collection in rural areas. The conversation ended with a discussion on how to bring all this information together to make a case to the government for increased investment in rural connectivity and digital inclusion. Speakers highlighted the potential benefits of improved connectivity, such as boosting productivity and economic growth, and improving access to services. They encouraged collaboration among councils and organisations to share case studies and evidence to support their lobbying efforts.