RSN Seminar: Rural Digital Connectivity

Date: 31st March 2021
Subject: Rural Digital Connectivity
Chair: Kerry Booth, Assistant Chief Executive, Rural Services Network
Host: Online Event via Zoom

Speakers

Speaker 1: Huw Saunders, Director of Network Infrastructure and Resilience, OFCOM
Speaker 2: Katy Mason and Sharon Wagg, Lancaster University Management School
Speaker 3: Amy Cobbett, Business and Rural Affairs Adviser, National Farmers Union

Learning Outcomes
3   Examples of Good Practice

- Funding of Digital Skills training – The Good Foundation[1]
- Tove Valley Broadband community project[2] - distribute connections via radio and "fibre to the premises" with full 1,000Mbps.
- Agri-tech trials currently underway on 5G with Cybermoor[3], based in Cumbria.

Key Learning Points

- **Public Switched Telephone Network (PTSN) service** will be switched off in 2025. The switch off will provide challenges, in particular for telecare devices, card payment terminals and access to emergency services during power cuts. Replacements will be Voice Over Broadband (VOBB) and Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) using Session Initiation Protocol (SIP). Discussions are underway with Critical National Infrastructure Users (CNIs).
- **Ofcom wants a well-managed migration** and will publish guidance and best practice guidelines. Pilot schemes underway in Salisbury and Mildenhall.
- **"Discovery" exercise** recommended for rural businesses to know how their PSTN lines are used and then engage with providers for a solution e.g. fixed voice/mobile /low orbit satellite etc. Businesses and residents in rural areas need to plan for the changes as it will affect nearly all landlines. Recommendation for further information from Local Resilience Forums.[4]
- **Some copper network will remain after 2025** in rural areas as it will take longer to completely switch off (maybe another 10 years) but the switch from PTSN WILL happen at the end of 2025.
- **Competing companies important to roll out services** but will lead to some duplication of infrastructure. Some of these difficulties and delays to roll out are being addressed by the Barrier Busting Task Force set up by Matt Hancock when he was the Digital Minister.

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[1] https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/
[2] https://www.tovevalley.com/
[3] http://www.cybermoor.org/
[4] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-resilience-forums-contact-details

Providing a voice for rural communities and service providers

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Digital Infrastructure Grand Challenge:

Working in an Inclusive Way with Rural Communities

- **Mobile Across North Yorkshire (MANY) project** looked at the eco-system of production, consumption, and institutional domains in digital connectivity over four use cases. Some issues with conducting research under Covid regulations but very important to be transparent, to communicate early and often with communities and recognise tensions.
- **Important to engage with third sector local organisations** who understand their communities best and develop technical solutions that work with and for rural areas. Poor connectivity puts people off engaging which creates a massive hurdle when connections are better as need to work hard to re-engage with this group.
- **Need more events like today** to share best practice/research/equity of access. Access varies from location to location and needs more granularity on the issue.

2020 NFU Digital Survey Results

- **NFU Broadband and Mobile Survey** recently completed to gauge the levels of connection/access and use of technology across NFU members. 93% of respondents said broadband was essential for business but only 46% believed their signal was good enough. The average age of a member is 65+ yet 99.5% own a cell phone, 82% have access to 4G and only 40% had broadband speed sufficient for business needs. 74% have never been offered superfast broadband.
- **Health and Safety concerns,** access to mental health services, isolating occupation, family connections and business have all gone digital. Digital access is very important and productivity in farming businesses will increase with greater access.
- **NFU call for priority of Shared Rural Network rollout** with clear timelines and maps of targeted areas.
- **All government grants** should shift focus to rural friendly broadband solutions and better marketing of other solutions.
- **Digital skills training** should be rural focused, and no-one disadvantaged digitally because of the areas they live.

Any Other Key Outcomes from the Seminar

RSN's [Revitalising Rural Campaign](#)[5] Specific Policy Asks of the Government – Broadband USO, Gigabit-capable connectivity, Mobile networks and Digital Skills and Inclusion. RSN will update and keep the documentation live and relevant. There will be a fresh crosscut of the Revitalising document to look in more depth at younger and older people, working families and businesses (includes agri.). It will also look at the impact of various issues on these groups of people and develop case studies (personal experiences) rather than dry policy discussions.

Graham Biggs MBE, RSN, has recently spoken to Matt Warman MP (Minister for Digital Infrastructure) who is looking into hard-to-reach areas. **RSN will produce a position paper on changes to PCNS and** share a consultation draft before sending to the Minister. The

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[5] https://www.rsnonline.org.uk/revitalising-rural

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session today has reinforced the need for the RSN to add greater depth and texture to the various Chapters of Revitalising Rural. It has also highlighted **confusion over the roles of Ofcom and the government** regarding the PTSN changes**.** Graham will raise this with the Minister. A senior civil servant would like to attend an RSN meeting before the consultation on hard-to-reach premises ends in June - a special meeting will be arranged.

You can view and respond to the **DCMS Consultation on hard-to-reach premises** by following this link.[6]

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[6] https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/improving-broadband-for-very-hard-to-reach-premises

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