RSN Seminar Notes "The Unreachables – Connecting the Rural and Urban Divide" 11 February 2014

AM Session: Notes from Connection Cheshire Presentation:

Group 1:

Progress and capacity are not always directly linked – its often not the speed of broadband, but the willingness of people to use it which makes the difference.

Mobile phone connectivity is also an issue but 4G roll out may solve this challenge

BT near monopoly over the broadband infrastructure makes life very difficult if you want to develop a genuinely independent solution

Broadband has not led to a massive increase in home working, as proved by the 2011 census figures, instead it has enabled people to work differently

There would be real benefit in de-personalising the internet – so that it didn't provide an alternative to social interaction (probably impossible)

Micro-business opportunities can be enhanced in rural areas through access to the internet, there are good examples in this context linked to use of pubs as hubs

Creating youth mentors to train the elderly in the use of the internet is a socially useful initiative – if this was accompanied by the marketing of a "simple" device which provided basic internet access without the need for upgrades, complexity or refinement that would be a great innovation

Group 2:

There are no definitive figures for the numbers of people on and off line

Demand stimulation for broadband is not the answer as of itself, particularly if the infrastructure is likely to need upgrading

There is a whole agenda around connecting parish and town clerks and the broader roll out of the parish agenda via the internet – which is patchy at the current time

Young people and the elderly are both "pinch points" at either end of the broadband enabled spectrum

The need for people to make personal and business related transactions on line gives no choice to people in relation to getting connected and will lead to inequalities from a rural urban perspective around speed and availability

Where it works effectively – through initiatives such as tele-health and in terms of schemes such as Village Agents enhanced connectivity can be empowering in rural areas

The Connecting Rainow project is a classic/typical example of how the quality of life in rural areas can be improved via super-fast broadband. There is real merit in writing up examples of this sort of achievement to inspire others.

Alternative thinking can e-enable the high street and breathe new life back into pubs if broadband's full range of empowering opportunities to rural communities is embraced.

There are broadband solutions to the loss of rural services which could also be embraced and some interesting angles around:

"use it or lose it" – broadband opening up new opportunities to use established facilities

"change it" – the opportunity to adapt vulnerable services through "clever" use of ICT

In providing "e-enabled" solutions to these challenges local authorities and infrastructure providers need to tread a fine line between individualism and corporate responsibility

Broadband does provide the opportunity for people – ie migrant workers, the elderly, to extend their immediate linkages to stay in touch with their wider social and community agenda.

Broadband can drive the development of local service delegation and responsiveness to local issues enabling local authorities and other providers to decentralise and delegate service provision.

PM Session:

Discussions were held with all delegates as one group

3- Different Aspect of Connectivity - Community Benefit in Copeland, Settle Geo-Trail and Community Transport

"Rural" is a many faceted concept and in the context of community benefit there isn't a straightforward rural/urban split in community agendas.

There has been a huge proliferation of wind farm community benefit funds, but thinking has not caught up with this in terms of carefully assessing the distribution of rewards for having such a facility in a locality

Fracking is likely to be the next big issue in terms of the community benefit agenda - and there is currently a lack of meaningful information about its implications

In Copeland the requirement for meaningful contributions to sit alongside the community benefit funding has made a significant contribution to the Copeland Community Fund generating significant financial leverage

The Settle Geo-Trail project has not just re-interpreted the landscape it has had a major impact on the business development of the High Street in Settle through the Vibrant Settle App

The movement of Apps into the public sector sphere is an increasingly important agenda in terms of connecting with communities.

Community Transport, like the community benefit point above, has as many generic urban/rural features as it has distinctive challenges linked to rurality – in this context it is useful to "turn the telescope round" and think about the needs of users in rural areas as much as about the impact of "rural" as a spatial construct.

Hard to reach groups may be more disadvantaged in terms of rural transport, those on low incomes and single parents face difficult challenges wherever they are but there may be some exacerbating circumstances linked to being in a rural location.

There is much to learn from EU models of public and community transport provision – the requirement in Holland for providers who wish to close a service to fund community replacement solutions is particularly interesting and there is a considerable amount that could be learnt from them and transferred to the UK.

Engaging young people directly in developing solutions to rural community transport challenges facing them is good practice. There is an interesting example (albeit urban – but transferrable) currently underway in the East Riding in Goole.

There is scope to make more of the taxi-bus option, but it has been used sparingly in the UK simply because, notwithstanding empowering legislation, few taxi operators are attracted to it.

High Level General Points

Rural Service Challenges are often based on a "false" distinction and there is much in common around the challenges facing rural and urban places

Having said that there are some distinctive issues which did emerge from the discussion:

1. The opportunity to address market failure in rural areas through broadband – in terms of service provision and economic development through activities such as "E-enabling" High Streets
2. The opportunity to address rural isolation for key vulnerable groups in rural areas through broadband
3. The contribution key resources in terms of the provision of energy generation sites, or tourist trails can make to improving the sustainability of rural areas through community benefit or tourism strategies
4. The learning which can be developed to facilitate the most effective rural transport solutions through looking at approaches elsewhere, particularly in terms of this seminar in relation to the Dutch example
5. The benefit of involving those most directly affected by the lack of a service in rural areas in designing solutions – the example of young people in terms of community transport was discussed at the seminar