



The Rural Services Network

National Rural Conference 2024

Delivering for Rural - Unlocking rural prosperity

Tuesday 17th September

Rural Connectivity Session

AI GENERATED SUMMARY OF THE SESSION

Rural Connectivity Session at National Rural Conference

Kerry Booth, Chief Executive of the Rural Services Network, welcomed participants to the Rural Connectivity session of the National Rural Conference and thanking the conference's supporters and sponsors, and briefly discussed the Rural Services Network's role as the National Champion for rural services. She emphasized the importance of connectivity for rural communities, citing the challenges faced by those living in areas with poor mobile and broadband connectivity. Kerry also highlighted the Rural Services Network's policy areas, including fair funding for rural public services and rural policy that meets rural needs.

Digital Towns Program Success and Future Plans

Nick Khan, Strategic Director, & Alex Heys, Community Projects, Digital Marketing and Safeguarding Manager, East Suffolk Council, discussed the Digital Towns program, which aims to provide free public Wi-Fi in 11 rural market towns, support small businesses to become more digital, and increase footfall in these towns. The program has seen significant success, with 80,000 registrations for the free Wi-Fi and 20,000 subscribers to the email marketing list. The data collected from the program has been used to improve the digital assets of the towns, such as their websites and social media accounts. The program has also led to the towns investing in digital technologies and employing marketing coordinators. The next steps for the program include developing town apps and using real-time location-based promotion. The program was initially funded by from money available through the Local Enterprise Partnership and some Digital Accelerator Funding. Some towns have contributed their own resources to the project.

Transition to Digital Landlines and Customer Support

Vicky Hicks, Head of Engagement from the Digital Voice Programme, BT discussed the transition from analog to digital landlines, emphasizing the outdated nature of the current network and the benefits of the digital service, including advanced scam protection features and improved call quality. She also addressed concerns about power cuts and the provision of hybrid phones or battery backup units. Vicki discussed BT's efforts to support vulnerable customers during the transition, including partnerships with organizations like the Rural Services Network and charities, provision of free power resilient kits, and engineer-assisted visits. She also addressed concerns about the cost of the transition and the potential for customers to be disconnected without a digital voice service, encouraging further engagement and suggesting that customers with additional needs or telecare services should make contact for more support. Vicky also

highlighted the need for Data Sharing Agreements to be signed with all Local Authorities to enable the sharing of data about vulnerable customers to ensure that they received the right support throughout the process.

Improving Connectivity for Rural Businesses

Richard Potts, Chief Adviser for Business and Farm Management at the NFU (National Farmers' Union), presented the NFU's digital access survey results, highlighting the importance of reliable mobile and broadband signals for modern farming businesses in the UK. The survey revealed that only 24% of respondents get a reliable mobile signal in all outdoor locations on the farm, but 97% believe that mobile signal is important for their business. The use of digital technologies is growing, and improved connectivity is crucial for tasks such as interacting with government agencies and completing business obligations. Richard also discussed the progress and challenges in mobile and broadband coverage in rural areas and potential barriers to further use of digital technology, including lack of knowledge and training. Richard mentioned the new government's commitment to improve broadband capacity by 2030 and the NFU's collaboration with the RSN and the Rural Coalition to advocate for better connectivity in rural areas.

Addressing Digital Poverty and Exclusion Challenges

Elizabeth, the Chief Executive of the Digital Property Alliance, discussed the issue of digital poverty and exclusion, emphasizing that having a smartphone or a laptop does not guarantee full access to digital services, especially in rural areas with poor connectivity and limited device availability. She identified five key areas of digital poverty: affordability, connectivity, skills and capability, accessibility and design, confidence and motivation, and support with technology. Elizabeth also highlighted the issue of digital poverty in the UK, noting that 13 to 19 million adults are affected, including 16+ year olds, and that up to 24,000 lives could be saved annually if older people had access to technology for health information. She stressed the importance of addressing these issues to ensure equal access to digital services for all. The discussion also focused on the issue of digital poverty in rural and coastal communities in England, particularly in the northeast region, and the need for a national solution to tackle it. Elizabeth emphasized the importance of collaboration from various sectors, including government, local authorities, businesses, schools, health trusts, and charities, and suggested that other spaces in communities, such as village halls, could be used to support digital inclusion.

Improving Rural Connectivity and Government Action

The meeting focused on improving connectivity in rural areas and the need for government action. The speakers discussed the importance of local councillors making noise to influence government decisions and the need for a collective voice. They also discussed the challenge of getting government to listen to rural district and borough councils. The idea of building relationships with new MPs to share real-life stories was suggested as a way to win their support. The issue of recycling laptops was also addressed and open source designs for laptops was proposed as a potential solution to reduce support costs. The conversation ended with a suggestion to check party policy on digital poverty and funding.

Next Steps

- 1.** Local authorities to check whether they have signed a data sharing agreements with BT for to share information on vulnerable customers.
- 2.** RSN members to raise awareness of digital connectivity issues with local MPs.
- 3.** RSN members to explore opportunities for using community spaces like village halls as digital access points.
- 4.** Local authorities to consider role of digital champions in improving connectivity.
- 5.** Organizations to consider signing the Digital Poverty Alliance's charter for digital inclusion.