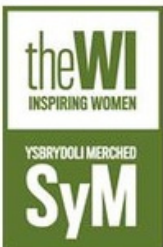


Digital Connectivity Action Pack



Background

NFWI-Wales, the FUW, NFU Cymru, CLA Cymru and the Wales YFC have been focusing on digital connectivity across Wales. This partnership was developed in response to comments from members in rural areas that they were being greatly impacted by poor broadband connections and mobile signals.

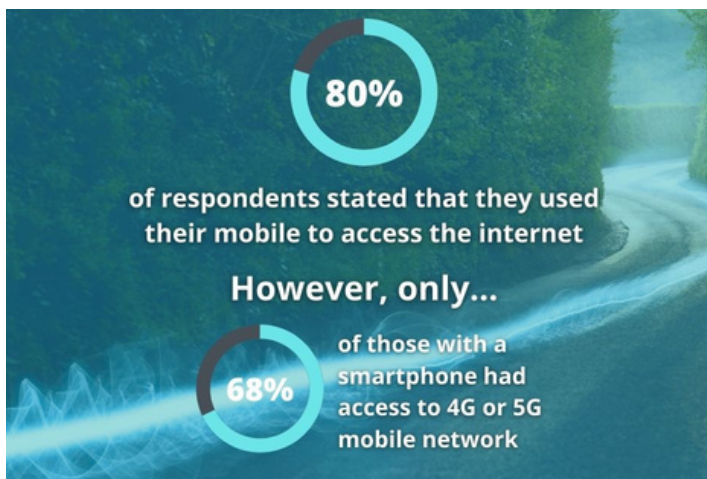
Good, reliable digital connectivity is essential for work, business, education, leisure and day to day activities. Since Covid-19 the importance of good digital connectivity has become more and more evident. We have relied on internet access to keep connected with family, friends and our communities. Children and young people need access to on-line educational resources and many services, such as banking and mental health support, are accessible remotely. Digital connectivity is essential for farmers to run their businesses such as the submission of online forms and online business transactions. It is also vital for farm health and safety. Poor broadband and mobile signals in rural communities has been highlighted as a barrier to victims of domestic abuse in rural communities from being able to access support.

Research findings

A survey was carried out between 25 February and 31 March 2021 to paint a picture of digital connectivity across Wales.

Respondents highlighted that the challenges of working from home and for children accessing education had been particularly difficult and frustrating during the Covid-19 pandemic due to poor connectivity.

- Less than 50% of those who lived in rural areas stated they had standard broadband and only 36% had superfast broadband.
- 66% of respondents from a rural area stated that they, or their household, had been impacted by poor broadband, compared to their urban counterparts who said 18% had access to standard broadband and 67% had superfast broadband.



- 57% of those from a rural area described the mobile signal in their house as 'unreliable' and 49% of those from a rural area stated that their signal was 'unreliable' outdoors.
- 75% of respondents did not know where to access support to improve their broadband connectivity and only 19% were aware of the UK-wide Gigabit Voucher Scheme.

Quotes from survey participants

"We are a farm and mobile phones do not work in the house, we have to either go 100 yards up a bank or a mile out on the road for connection."

"I have no phone signal, which makes working at home difficult. I use WiFi calling but the internet is too unreliable for this to be a success. It makes working from home difficult and I feel I am not progressing due to limitations in what I can do. I cannot take on my usual workload. There is no mobile phone signal and I have to travel 15 minutes one direction or 25 minutes in the other direction before I can make or receive a call. This is then not even 3G to pick up emails."

"Fibre is available in some villages I think, but anyone who lives outside those has a very small group of companies willing to provide a service. Fibre and a reliable connection is important for all homes for the sustainability of the Welsh economy."

"Reliable internet is a huge problem and has been the biggest source of stress during Covid for us - we have been lucky and healthy, but our work, shopping, banking and connection with friends and family have been entirely reliant on the internet. This is now a human rights need - like clean water."

Current situation

According to Ofcom's Connected Nations report 2020, around 18,000 homes in Wales are unable to access 'decent' broadband, which is defined as providing download speeds of 10 Mbit/s (megabits per second) and upload speeds of 1 Mbit/s.

24% of homes in Wales have access to full-fibre connections, which is in line with the UK average for full fibre availability, and 94% have access to a superfast broadband service which is defined as providing download speeds of at least 30 Mbit/s.

The UK Government target is for 85% of premises in the UK to have access to gigabit capable broadband by 2025. This replaces their previous commitment of ensuring access to every home by 2025.

The Welsh Government has provided superfast connectivity to 733,000 premises across Wales but there are still 79,000 premises, known as 'white premises', without access to superfast broadband. The Welsh Government has recently carried out a review which aims to identify any existing or planned commercial coverage of gigabit broadband networks. The review will help to establish the areas where public investment may be needed to deploy services.



The Welsh Government has developed a Digital Strategy for Wales and has set up a Barrier Busting Taskforce.

Broadband services are also available from Fixed Wireless Access (FWA) networks, provided via mobile networks or through Wireless Internet Service Providers (WISPs). If managed well, FWA networks can deliver a decent broadband service, and can be used as an alternative network technology where consumers do not have access to a decent broadband connection on a fixed network. Ofcom estimates that 35,000 premises in Wales that do not have access to a decent broadband service from a fixed network could have access via an FWA network.

Openreach has announced its plans to reach 25 million premises in the UK with full-fibre ultrafast connectivity by December 2026. Hundreds of thousands of premises in Wales will be part of the upgrade with 6.2 million of the premises in the hardest to reach 'final third', defined by Ofcom as Geographic Area 3.

Over the next five years, Ogi has announced that it is building a new full fibre network across South Wales, focusing on towns and villages in Monmouthshire, Vale of Glamorgan and Pembrokeshire. It is a £200m project which aims to cover 150,000 premises by late 2025.



As of May 2021, 93% of premises in Wales have access to 4G coverage outdoors from at least one operator, however only 60% of Wales' geographic area has coverage from all four operators. The Shared Rural Network programme, an agreement between the UK Government and the UK's four mobile network operators, aims to increase this to 95% good 4G coverage from at least one operator and 80% by all four operators in Wales by 2026. Mid and West Wales has been identified as the region that will benefit second most from the Shared Rural Network after the Scottish Highlands and Islands.

Quotes from industry experts at webinar

"Bridging the digital divide is also about people having the skills and the confidence to make the most what is increasingly available to them and an increasing culture of innovation."

Nick Speed, BT Group

"We need to make sure that services are fast, reliable and affordable. The only way that can happen in very hard to reach areas is through public intervention."

"We need to strive to make Wales the easiest place to build networks."

Elinor Williams, Ofcom

[The Welsh Government] is "keen to get as much connectivity out to as many people and premises."

"We think broadband should be treated as a utility. It is essential to people's life. It's not an added nice to have." **Julie James MS, Minister for Climate Change**

"Wayleaves are a big barrier faced by Openreach in respect of enabling full-fibre."

Kim Mears OBE, Openreach

What we are calling for

- The digital divide between rural and urban areas to be addressed.
- Broadband and mobile phone signal to be recognised as an essential public service in Wales.
- The Welsh Government to further invest in rural infrastructure to enable rural families, farm businesses and others to capitalise on digital connectivity opportunities and not be left behind, increasing the digital divide between urban and rural areas.
- Governments to address the current barriers to improving infrastructure and to provide the necessary investment to support the roll-out of infrastructure to all rural areas.
- Further awareness of the current schemes available to support households and businesses to improve their connectivity.



Ideas for action

1. Share your experiences, both positive and negative, with your member organisation.
2. Find out about the current schemes available to support households and businesses to improve their connectivity (see section below)
3. Contact your local authority for advice and support. A number of local authorities in Wales have digital officers: <https://gov.wales/local-broadband-fund>
4. Organise a community meeting and invite industry representatives, local politicians and other interested parties to attend.
5. Write to your MP and Members of the Senedd and let us know what responses you receive. Contact the your member organisation for a template letter that you can adapt.
6. Watch our webinar that was streamed as part of the virtual 2021 Royal Welsh Show - <https://royalwelsh.digital/digital-connectivity-on-rural-wales/>

Funding schemes

UK Government's Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme

Gigabit internet delivers download speeds of up to 1Gbps, the equivalent of 1,000 Mbit/s. Rural premises with broadband speeds of less than 100 Mbit/s can apply for UK Gigabit Vouchers worth £1,500 per home and up to £3,500 for each small to medium-sized business (SME) to support the cost of installing new fast and reliable connections. Those with speeds of less than 30 Mbps may be eligible for additional funding from the Welsh Government towards these costs. Welsh Government will pay up to an additional £1,500 per resident and £3,500 per SME in order to help connect harder-to-reach rural properties in Wales. Further information:- <https://gigabitvoucher.culture.gov.uk/wales/>

Local Broadband Fund

The Welsh Government has made £10 million available through its Local Broadband Fund to support local authorities and social enterprises to deliver broadband projects locally. It is focused on communities and parts of Wales which do not currently have access to 30 Mbit/s broadband speeds.

The funding can be used to deliver fast, reliable broadband in areas of Wales currently without access; create new broadband infrastructure including backhaul facilities; and upgrade existing broadband infrastructure. Further information:- <https://gov.wales/local-broadband-fund>

Access Broadband Cymru

This scheme provides grants to fund (or part-fund) the installation costs of new broadband connections for homes and businesses in Wales. New connections through this scheme must deliver a step change in speed - with at least double current download speeds. The amount of funding received is dependent on the speed of the new connection.

Applications are accepted from individual residents, enterprises or third sector organisations and community schemes.

For further information, please contact 0300 025 8887, e-mail broadband@gov.wales or visit <https://gov.wales/go-superfast/boost-your-broadband>

Community Fibre Partnerships (CFPs):

A CFP is where Openreach work with a local group representing two or more premises to bring superfast, or ultrafast, to an area. Where possible they bring together funding from local authorities, Government voucher schemes and other grants to help make things affordable. Further information is available at <https://communityfibre.openreach.co.uk/>

Universal Service Obligation

Under the Broadband Universal Service Obligation (USO), citizens who can't access a broadband service of more than 10Mbit/s download or 1Mbit/s upload, have a legal right to request an upgraded connection up to a cost threshold of £3,400. Visit the USO checker website to check eligibility: <https://www.bt.com/broadband/USO>

Further information

Ofcom's 2020 Connected Nations report for Wales and interactive dashboard

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/209441/connected-nations-2020-wales.pdf

<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/multi-sector-research/infrastructure-research/connected-nations-2020/interactive-report>

Ofcom's Connected Nations Update - Summer 2021

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0013/224212/connected-nations-summer-2021.pdf

Openreach

<https://www.openreach.com/fibre-broadband/where-when-building-ultrafast-full-fibre-broadband>

BT Skills for Tomorrow - Free skills to feel more confident and develop your digital skills

<https://www.bt.com/skillsfortomorrow>

BT Small Business Support Scheme

<https://www.bt.com/about/bt/our-company/group-businesses/enterprise/small-business-support-scheme>

Digital Communities Wales

<https://www.digitalcommunities.gov.wales/>

Digital Strategy for Wales, Welsh Government

<https://gov.wales/digital-strategy-wales-html>

Report of the National Infrastructure Commission for Wales

<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-12/digital-communications-infrastructure-in-wales-report-and-recommendations.pdf>

Shared Rural Network Programme

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/shared-rural-network>

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