

Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, yr Amgylchedd a Seilwaith /  
Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee  
Cysylltedd digidol yng Nghymru / Digital connectivity in Wales  
DC01

Ymateb gan Ffederasiwn Cenedlaethol Sefydliadau'r Merched-Cymru /  
Evidence from National Federation of Women's Institutes-Wales

## **Submission to the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee on digital connectivity in Wales**

The National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI)-Wales welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee on digital connectivity in Wales.

The WI is the largest voluntary women's organisation in the UK with over 190,000 members in 5,500 WIs across England, Wales, and the Islands. In Wales, we have about 14,000 members belonging to close to 500 WIs.

Since Covid-19 the importance of good digital connectivity has become more and more evident. During the lockdown, we relied on internet access to keep connected with family, friends and our communities. Children and young people were educated via on-line resources and many services, such as banking and mental health support, were accessible remotely.

The reliance on digital connectivity since Covid-19 has highlighted the need to speed up the roll-out of full-fibre broadband and mobile coverage to all parts of Wales, and in particular to rural communities. Access to fast and reliable connectivity is essential for work, business, education, leisure and day to day activities.

During the Covid-19 lockdowns, a number of rural federations highlighted to NFWI-Wales the impact of poor broadband access and mobile phone signals on their members. For example, Pembrokeshire Federation informed us that some of their members were unable to join online events from their homes. We were also informed by a member of an occasion when paramedics at her home were unable to get a phone signal and had to travel up the road.

Poor broadband connectivity and mobile phone signal impacts on a number of the NFWI's campaign areas including supporting mental health, alleviating loneliness and ending violence against women.

In November 2020, NFWI-Wales hosted a panel debate focusing on violence against women in rural communities. Poor broadband access and mobile signal in rural communities was highlighted as a barrier to people's ability to reach out for support.

Access to fast and reliable connectivity will be essential if the Welsh Government is to achieve its ambition of encouraging people to work flexibly and remotely. As another example, the Wales Transport Strategy refers to the use of digital connectivity in accessing timetables and booking services on-line.

In January 2021 NFWI-Wales, the Wales YFC, NFU Cymru, the FUW and the CLA Wales came together to focus on digital connectivity in response to experiences highlighted by our respective members in relation to poor connectivity issues. Since then, we have jointly undertaken 2 surveys to gather the experiences of people in Wales, held a webinar with industry experts and developed an Action Pack for our members outlining the current situation and sources of support to help improve connectivity.

## **Current situation**

According to Ofcom's Connected Nations report 2021:

- around 15,000 homes and businesses in Wales are unable to access 'decent' broadband, which is defined as providing download speeds of 10 Mbit/s and upload speeds of 1 Mbit/s.
- 27% of homes in Wales have access to full-fibre broadband and 94% have access to a superfast broadband service which is defined as providing download speeds of at least 30 Mbit/s (megabits per second).
- around 7,850 premises in Wales cannot access either a decent fixed broadband service or get good 4G coverage indoors.

## **Digital connectivity survey findings launched in May 2021**

A survey was carried out between 25 February and 31 March 2021 to paint a picture of digital connectivity across Wales. In total, 611 responses were received, and the key findings are outlined below.

- Over 50% of respondents from a rural area did not feel that the internet they had access to was fast and reliable.
- Indeed, less than 50% of those who lived in rural areas stated they had standard broadband and only 36% had superfast broadband and 66% stated that they or their household had been impacted by poor broadband. In comparison, 18% of their urban counterparts said they had access to standard broadband and 67% had superfast broadband.
- Whilst 80% of respondents used their mobile phone to access the internet, just 68% of those with a smartphone had access to a 4G or 5G mobile network to access the internet.
- 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.

## **Impact of poor broadband and mobile phone signals**

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

Some of the comments by respondents are provided below:

*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.*

*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.*

*We have to coordinate online meetings to ensure we're not both using something like Zoom simultaneously; I've had the internet cut out in the middle of presenting to a committee for work; I've been on panels where my internet was too slow for the live streaming software and so have had to drive and use my phone on a hill; our interaction with friends and family has been impacted as we've had to reset the internet over and over again. Every part of our lives has been impacted.*

*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.*

### **Digital connectivity survey - mid October to early December 2021**

Ahead of the 2021 Royal Welsh Winter Fair, a short survey was launched by NFWI-Wales, the FUW, NFU Cymru, Wales YFC and CLA Wales to explore how people in Wales feel about the level of communication between themselves and their provider, cost-value of service and further look at how proposed changes to online livestock recording systems are going to affect the farming community.

Some of the key findings are included below:

- 57% of respondents rated their broadband as 'poor' or 'moderate'.
- 53% of respondents felt that they had been negatively impacted by poor broadband.
- Over 50% of respondents did not feel that they were being informed about the services and support available to them to improve their broadband connectivity.
- 54% of respondents stated that they did not know where to access information and support to improve their broadband connection.
- 35% of respondents rated the communication they receive from their current internet provider as 'satisfactory', 25% rated it as 'poor', 24% as 'good' and 9% as 'excellent'.
- 54% of farmers/landowners would prefer to administer/manage their business both online and on paper.
- In response to the consultation on proposals to move to an online livestock recording system, just 45% of farmers/landowners stated that they would be content using an exclusively online system with 50% stating that they did not feel their broadband was good enough to enable them to complete livestock records online.

## **Summary of key issues and action needed**

The research findings have highlighted the digital divide between rural and urban areas. Further investment is needed in rural infrastructure to enable rural families, farm businesses and others to capitalise on digital connectivity opportunities and not be left behind.

Broadband and mobile phone signal should be recognised as an essential public service in Wales.

There is a need to address the current barriers to improving broadband and mobile infrastructure and to provide the necessary investment to support the roll-out of infrastructure to all rural areas.

Greater awareness is needed of the sources of support and current schemes available aimed at helping households and businesses to improve their connectivity. To address the low level of awareness identified from the survey findings, NFWI-Wales, in partnership with the Wales YFC, the FUW, FUW and the CLA Wales hosted another webinar on 28 April to raise awareness about the sources of support and funding available.

Improving communication with consumers is vital. Service providers should keep consumers updated on the services they offer and give suitable advice on the broadband packages available for consumers to improve their connectivity.

A concern raised during joint meetings between NFWI-Wales, the FUW, Wales YFC, FUW and CLA Wales has been the impact, during the recent storms, on communities that had been switched from copper to fibre connectivity. Power cuts had resulted in people being left with no phone lines when the 4G and 5G infrastructure went down. In an emergency, people would have had to travel to get a phone signal. The lack of access to emergency services could people at risk such as those requiring urgent medical attention and women in abusive relationships.