

Rising to the rural connectivity challenge

As the world grows ever more digitally dependent, so do we. More and more of life's necessary activities have moved online, and those of us with a slow, unreliable or even no connection, are at a rapidly growing disadvantage.



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Freshest in our minds is the 2020 lockdown: confined indoors, our internet connections became our lifelines.

If you had a reliable, high-speed connection, you minimised your sense of social isolation via seamless audio and video calls with family and friends, and kept in touch with colleagues, customers and suppliers; you ordered your necessities from online shops in a matter of minutes; you performed business, personal and household administration with little hassle; you were able to continue working towards a professional qualification, or homeschool your children; and you were able to stay on top of the news and find reliable information.

If your connection was not up to the task, you could spend minutes waiting for a simple webpage to load and allow you to add a single food item to your virtual shopping basket. In many households, families had to choose between parents using the internet for work, news and necessities, and allowing children sufficient bandwidth to join online classes. Doing these simultaneously just wasn't an option.

Perhaps more importantly, we relied almost exclusively on reliable high-speed broadband to stay connected with one another, to talk, to see each other's faces, to reach out for help. Beyond a doubt, then as now, poor connectivity contributes to the isolation of vulnerable people.

2020 has also acted as a pressure cooker for many other ills of society, connected once more to disadvantage and isolation. It is clearer now than ever that, for the future of our society, education, access to reliable information and experience of the wider world are critical.

For those living in rural and remote areas, and young people especially, the internet's 'information highway' is a road out of isolation, a pathway to education, understanding, wider opportunities and a richer life. This enrichment is key to growing socially responsible communities and empowered individuals.

Alongside this are the more immediately felt improvements to our day to day quality of life. Good connectivity can be the difference between young people and families putting down roots in rural areas or leaving them to seek better education and work opportunities; between farmers and agricultural businesses thriving or struggling; between being able to age well at home, in the heart of your community, or having to move away to find the medical care and daily support you need.

For the sustainability of rural communities themselves, reliable high-speed broadband can make all the difference – and it all comes down to improving the lives of rural people, in the immediate as well as the long-term.

Many rural communities have suffered gradual depopulation for years, as the 'opportunity gap' between rural and urban areas widens. Digitalisation and connectivity however can help reverse this trend, as they make many opportunities accessible from anywhere in the world – so long as you have a good connection.

Urban areas currently have the advantage in this too, as urban population densities and infrastructure combine to create a more cost-effective environment for private investment in broadband networks than in rural areas.

There is, however, a growing trend of self-starting broadband projects driven by rural communities and municipalities instead of telecommunications companies. Arising across Europe, these projects can succeed in changing the lives of their community members as well as ensuring the future of their communities as a whole. For rural and remote area inhabitants, communities and businesses, these projects can be transformative. They can bring a broad range of lasting social, economic and environmental benefits through the services and technologies they enable.

In order to support rural and remote communities to realise this potential, the European Commission recently published a 'rural broadband handbook'. The handbook presents useful information for those planning a rural or remote area broadband project, as the challenges can be unexpected and the experiences of other such projects, presented in the handbook, can provide valuable insights in overcoming them.

The challenges of deploying broadband in rural and remote areas not only include the more obvious ones - lower population densities, longer distances and rougher terrain - but also the less obvious challenges that can do more for the success or failure of a project. These are the challenges of project planning: getting the right technical and legal advice; making the right choice of technology and business model; choosing the right partners; knowing the ways of keeping costs down; knowing how to secure and combine funding sources; and more.

Through 12 individual case studies, the handbook demonstrates the impact of different approaches to planning and implementing rural broadband projects. It outlines the most common success factors and replicable good practices, and provides a list of 18 essential recommendations. The handbook

also guides project organisers to further resources for advice and support, such as Broadband Competence Offices, the Guide to High-Speed Broadband Investment, as well as the lead contact for each project illustrated.

Rise to the challenge of rural connectivity: explore the handbook here.

Find out more

- The status of connectivity in your area: the European Broadband Mapping Portal
- Who to contact about broadband deployment in your Member State or region: BCO Network Directory
- Information on EU funding for broadband
- Information on technical assistance for broadband

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