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Survey highlights digital urban-rural divide

A survey on digital connectivity has highlighted a gaping hole between urban and rural areas when it comes to access and stability of broadband and mobile phone reception.

The survey, run by the National Federation of Women's Institutes-Wales, CLA, Farmers' Union of Wales, NFU Cymru and Wales YFC, showed that over 50% of respondents from a rural area felt that the internet they had access to was not 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, with 66% stating 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.

Commenting on the broadband situation, one respondent said, *'broadband drops out regularly and it is regular for outages to last for many hours/days. It is unreliable for online video meetings and at its best we get 11-12 mb. This does not support 3 people working online but often it is much less and we cannot rely on it.'*

Another said, *'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.'*

Whilst 80% of participants used their mobile phone to access the internet, just 68% of those with a smartphone had access to a 4G or 5G mobile network. Describing the mobile signal in their house, 57% of those from a rural area stated that their signal was 'unreliable' and 49% of those from a rural area stated that their signal was 'unreliable' outdoors.

One respondent stated, *'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.'*

While another said, *'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.'*

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

In a joint statement, the organisations said: “The range of services and opportunities which are exclusively available through the internet has grown significantly over the past decade, and access to broadband is now regarded as a necessity by the majority of UK businesses and households. This has become particularly visible during the Covid-19 pandemic as many have relied upon access to broadband for keeping in contact with friends and family and to work virtually from home.

“The findings of our survey are therefore a real cause for concern and it has become clear that despite many UK and Welsh Government promises made over the years, the digital divide between rural and urban areas has not been addressed.

“Poor digital connectivity evidently impacts directly on our rural communities. It is essential that the next Welsh Government further invests 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. Broadband and mobile phone signal are an essential public service in Wales and must be recognised as such.”

The organisations have jointly written to the First Minister and relevant Cabinet Ministers outlining the survey findings. They have also requested a meeting to discuss the Welsh Government’s vision and roadmap to providing everyone with access to fast and reliable connectivity.

Ends

Note to editors:

Spokespeople from the National Federation of Women's Institutes-Wales, CLA, Farmers' Union of Wales, NFU Cymru and Wales YFC are available for interview on request.