

**Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural
Development, and the Islands**

Opening Statement

**Opening Statement Fintan O'Brien, Assistant Secretary
Department of Rural and Community Development
Wednesday 15 November 2023**

Good morning,

I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to address it this morning.

With me today is my colleague Brendan Whelan, Principal Officer in the Regional Development and Innovation Unit. I welcome the opportunity to update the committee on the work of the Department in the context of the importance that Our Rural Future assigns to issues of digital connectivity for rural communities.

Our Rural Future is the Governments policy for rural development for the period 2021 -2025. It sets out a vision for a thriving rural Ireland which is integral to our national, economic, social, and environmental wellbeing, and which is built on the interdependence of urban and rural areas.

The Policy sets out a wide range of actions to be delivered over its lifetime, which each action assigned to a lead Government Department. Within this context, the Department of Rural and Community Development is involved in rolling out a number of important initiatives which may be of interest to committee members today. This includes:

- supporting the promotion and availability of remote working spaces in hubs throughout the country,
- enabling the availability of high speed broadband connectivity through the Broadband Connection Points, supporting communities in using digital services to provide local activities in rural areas, that might otherwise not be available or accessible,
- supporting the national network of Broadband Officers in local authorities to facilitate the delivery of high speed broadband and promoting its benefits, and
- providing support for innovative digital projects.

Through this work and in partnership with our colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and in local authorities we are aiming to contribute to the adoption of digital technologies and to closing the digital divide between rural and urban areas.

I will provide you with a brief overview of our programmes we run or are involved in which I hope will provide insight into the role of the Department.

Connected Hubs

While there was a move towards blended and flexible working pre-pandemic, the timeline was greatly accelerated in 2020 because of Covid-19. *Our Rural Future*, recognises the opportunity for rural rejuvenation that remote working presents and commits to establishing a comprehensive and integrated national network of 400 remote working hubs by 2025. In 2021, connectedhubs.ie was launched, providing a shared online booking and payments platform for member hubs and their users.

In parallel, the Department has invested significantly to support the establishment, improvement and sustainability of hubs through the range of schemes which make up the Department's Rural Development Investment Programme.

There are currently 330 remote and co-working facilities across the country, including 58 Broadband Connection Points, on-boarded to the connected hubs platform, which means we are well on track to achieving our target of 400 remote working hubs by 2025. In addition to facilitating online bookings and payments, connectedhubs.ie is also

a platform for collecting and disseminating information, including the types of hubs available in Ireland.

National Hub Strategy

The Department's initial priority has been on establishing the Connected Hubs Network, putting the necessary infrastructure in place and achieving the required initial critical mass. Following strong progress on the establishment and awareness-raising phase of the project, our focus has shifted to the next stage of development.

To this end, the Department, in conjunction with colleagues from the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment, are leading on the formulation of a National Hub Strategy, which will set out a future direction for the national network of hubs incorporating enterprise, remote working and community services at hubs across the country.

One of the overall objectives is to ensure the strategic development and long-term sustainability of Ireland's existing hub infrastructure – key to this is close consultation with hub sector stakeholders and other government departments and state agencies. The strategy will help inform future decisions and enable a coherent approach to planning and investment in the hub sector.

Broadband Connection Points

Within the National Broadband Plan, Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) were developed to provide onsite connectivity for community use at publicly accessible premises in rural areas with poor broadband availability. There are almost 300 of these community based hubs distributed around the country. They are located in rural and isolated areas including on a number of off-shore islands, and are based in community halls, GAA clubs and tourist attractions that are centres of community life.

The goal of the BCPs is that community facilities become empowered through this connectivity, to further support their communities and to embrace new opportunities.

There are a number of pilot programmes currently underway, or recently completed, that explore the potential for BCPs to provide additional public benefit. Over the past 3 years, BCPs have hosted initiatives such as film festivals, music and art lessons and coding and digital skills classes. Funding has been awarded to successful programmes to continue past pilot stage.

One example of a successful programme for digital skills is OurKidsCode. This programme provides creative computing family after-school clubs aimed at helping families enjoy and understand

computing, while building parents' confidence to discover technology alongside their children.

Digital Innovation Programme

Between 2018 and 2021, the department provided €2m under the Digital Innovation Programme to trial innovative technologies across rural Ireland. These projects established the viability and efficacy of a number of technologies, including in the areas of rural tourism and public safety. Some of these projects that you may be aware of include the air quality monitoring project in Trim and the Smart Ring Buoy sensor project.

Broadband Officers

One of the key elements of supporting greater levels of rural digital connectivity over recent years has been the establishment of the Broadband Officer (BBO) Role in each of the 31 local authorities. This role was established as part of the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce, with co-funding provided by the Department. The BBOs act as the single point of contact for engagement with telecoms operators, assist with rollout of the NBP and other telecoms projects and create awareness of, and stimulate demand for, broadband services. They are also centrally involved in the establishment and maintenance of Broadband Connection Points.

In early 2023, the Department agreed a new role profile for the BBOs. This new role profile ensures the BBOs are employed full time in their role and sets out the importance of their role in implementing new and innovative technologies in their local authority area.

In short, the BBOs offer an essential connection between government and the local communities we serve.

Wifi4EU

WiFi4EU was a European Commission project that provided funding for 'free to use' Wi-Fi in public areas, such as town squares, parks and libraries. Over 1,000 free Wi-Fi hotspots were installed across 27 local authority areas. The Department committed to match the funding provided by the EU in order to add more Wi-Fi hotspots, effectively doubling the value of the investment.

The Department has provided total funding of over €1,000,000 to support this initiative. The WiFi4EU scheme commenced in 2018 and concluded in 2023. A new scheme has not been announced by the Commission.

Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce

The Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce plays an important role in the delivery of mobile phone and broadband coverage across the

country, and is managed in collaboration with our colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications.

The initial iteration of the Taskforce addressed many of the telecommunications challenges identified at its inception. The remaining challenges are more complex but no less important, require a high level of collaboration and in many cases have a longer timeframe for delivery.

The Taskforce currently has four main focus areas. They are:

- improving mobile phone coverage in rural areas,
- examining issues around planning permissions and licensing for establishing and sharing telecoms infrastructure,
- the use of public assets for telecoms purposes
- Improving the quality and availability of information for consumers of telecoms services and products.

All of these issues are closely linked to the delivery of connectivity in rural and remote areas.

Conclusion

I hope I have provided a useful overview of the work of the Department and the role we play in supporting digital connectivity in

rural areas. I am happy to take any questions that members of the committee may have.