



# Submission to the Digital Connectivity Strategy

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**Rialtas na hÉireann**  
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## Overview

Irish Rural Link (IRL) is the national network of rural community groups, representing over 600 groups and thousands of individuals committed to socially, environmentally and economically sustainable rural communities.

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the consultation on the Digital Connectivity Strategy.

IRL have long advocated for high speed broadband connection in rural communities and households and has continued to campaign and engage with Government on this. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted, more than ever, the digital divide in rural areas and the need for better digital connection. The delay to the roll-out of the National Broadband Plan as a result of the pandemic was a grave concern for IRL members and cast doubt over the plan and if fibre broadband will ever be an option for rural dwellers.

While remote working and digital hubs had started to be developed prior to the pandemic, it brought it to the fore during this time. Many employees who commuted long distance each day to an office in larger towns and cities and often told remote working was not an option were suddenly having to adjust to this new way of working. The new Rural Development Policy *“Our Rural Future”* has helped to further develop these digital hubs and remote working spaces so people living in rural areas can continue to work, some or most of the time, in one of these hubs close to where they live. The many benefits this can bring to local communities, in terms of being able to support local businesses more, become more involved in the community, volunteering and just a better work-life balance cannot be emphasised enough. We see the Digital Connectivity Strategy having a key role in the continued development of these hubs and ensuring the infrastructure is future proofed and kept up-to-date.

While the primary focus of the Digital Connectivity Strategy is on enabling the physical telecommunication infrastructure and services delivery for digital connectivity, the skills to use technology and understand the infrastructure is also important. There must be engagement both with the Department of Communications and with other Government departments on this Strategy to ensure it is inclusive of everyone.

The following are some recommendations to be considered for the Digital Connectivity Strategy.

### **Is the ambition level set out in the State's Digital Connectivity Strategy appropriate?**

In relation to the first target for digital connectivity, that all Irish households and businesses will be covered by a Gigabit network no later than 2028, we would like to see this happen sooner. IRL deliver the 'Getting Citizens Online' digital skills programme and 'IT Skills for Farmers' both funded by the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications. During the pandemic lockdown restrictions these courses became invaluable for older people to stay in touch with family and friends. IRL provide training on basic computer skills through these programmes and support older people and other non-liners to access Government and banking services that have moved online. With more of these services continuing to move online there is a risk that for those living in the remotest parts of the country, will be unable to access these services and be left behind.

Government healthcare policy is to support people to age in their own home. With new technologies being developed each day to help support this and support those with a disability to live independently, many currently need or will need digital connectivity in the home to work. Many older people and people with disabilities may not be able to live an independent life or remain in their home if they do not have access to reliable broadband or mobile connection.

We welcome the target to complete the delivery of digital connectivity to all Connected Hubs and all Schools by 2023. However, we believe all rural Garda stations be included in this so crimes can be recorded accurately and in a timely fashion on the Garda PULSE system. It was previously reported that the lack of broadband in rural Garda Stations meant crimes had to be recorded on paper and oftentimes lost or were not included on national crime statistics.

### **Are the strategic enablers set out in the State's Digital Connectivity Strategy appropriate?**

Many rural households are still left behind in terms of access to reliable, high speed broadband. Many of the commercial investors in digital connectivity are not and will never be available to rural dwellers. Commercial investors that are available offer a mediocre service at a higher price than what would cost to an urban or suburban household.

The slow rollout of the National Broadband Plan and the delays in 2021 as a result of Covid-19 continues to be a frustration for many rural communities and households. Better communications about the rollout of the plan, the stages they are at and any delays are needed with the general public. This information needs to be accessible to all people with other forms than just going online.

The Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce must continue to be in place for the duration of this Digital Connectivity Strategy. This will allow for challenges or any difficulties that arise to be raised in a timely manner. It can also help ensure that any social divides are recognised quickly and brought to the Department's attention and solutions sought.

**The Department welcomes any views on how to ensure a sufficiently skilled workforce, with the necessary competence and experience, is available to industry and the State so that Digital Connectivity Strategy can be delivered? The Department would welcome suggestions on the State's role in encouraging the development of this workforce?**

The creation of broadband officer roles in each local authority as part of the National Broadband Plan was a welcome development. Part of this role should be to engage and communicate with local communities on the rollout of the Plan but also any difficulties that people may have in getting connected.

The Government should have some input into ensuring that staff and workforce of commercial providers of broadband and mobile phone services. The support and customer care services of some providers is extremely poor or is done either over the phone or online. This can be difficult for an older person or person with a disability to deal with. Better supports should be in place for older people and people with disability as well as those with low literacy and digital skills so that they are not excluded from a digital society.

### **Further Comments**

The rate of adult population that lack basic digital skills is 52%, which is well above the EU average of 43%. Irish Rural Link deliver the Getting Citizens Online basic computer training to adults over the age of 45 who have never used a computer before. It teaches people the very basic skills such as turning on the computer, the different parts of the computer, creating an email address, sending email, browsing the internet and using Government websites and paying bills, motor and property tax online. With payslips, P45's all moving online, employees who do not have basic digital skills must be trained up on these skills also.

While the primary focus of the Digital Connectivity Strategy is on enabling the physical telecommunication infrastructure and services delivery for digital connectivity, the skills to use technology and understand the infrastructure is also important. There must be engagement both with the Department of Communications and with other Government departments on this Strategy to ensure it is inclusive of everyone.

## **Irish Rural Link the Organisation**

Irish Rural Link (IRL), formed in 1991, is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. IRL, a non-profit organisation, has grown significantly since its inception and now directly represents over 600 community groups with a combined membership of 25,000.

The network provides a structure through which rural groups and individuals, representing disadvantaged rural communities, can articulate their common needs and priorities, share their experiences and present their case to policy-makers at local, national and European Level.

Irish Rural Link is the only group represented at the national social partnership talks solely representing rural communities' interests.

***'Our vision is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities that contribute to an equitable and just society'***

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

- To articulate and facilitate the voices of rural communities in local, regional, national and European policy arenas, especially those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and the challenge of change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- To promote local and community development in rural communities in order to strengthen and build the capacity of rural community groups to act as primary movers through practical assistance and advice.
- To research, critique and disseminate policies relating to rural communities including issues such as sustainability, social exclusion, equality and poverty
- To facilitate cross-border networking between rural communities

***'Our mission is to influence and inform local, regional, national and European development policies and programmes in favour of rural communities especially those who are marginalised as a result of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.'***