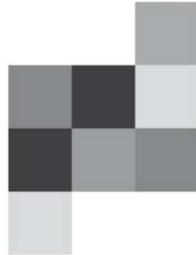


Consultation and information on technical licence conditions for 800 MHz and 2.6 GHz spectrum and related matters



## Rural Community Network

SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

### Response to the Consultation by Rural Community Network

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## Background to RCN

Rural Community Network (RCN) is a regional voluntary organisation established in 1991 by local community organisations to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage, equality, social exclusion and community development. Our vision is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland contributing to a prosperous, equitable, peaceful and stable society. Our mission is to provide an effective voice for and support to rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

RCN has 380 members across Northern Ireland. Its Board is representative of its membership base with more than half of its representatives (12) elected democratically from the community. The remaining representatives are from a mix of organisations that provide support or have a sectoral interest within rural communities. RCN's aims are:

- to empower the voice of rural communities
- to champion excellence in rural community development practice
- to develop civic leadership in rural communities
- to actively work towards an equitable and peaceful society
- to promote the sustainable development of rural communities

Rural communities make up approximately 35% of the population of Northern Ireland.

## Rural Poverty

- It is not spatially concentrated and is therefore more difficult to identify. Rural poverty is clearly associated with the remote rural regions although obviously not confined to them. The New Policy Institute<sup>1</sup> found, for example, that disadvantage was more prevalent in western districts of Northern Ireland.
- The average gross weekly earnings of people in rural areas in Northern Ireland from 2001 to 2006 was consistently below those living in urban, with the lowest rate of growth occurring in 'less accessible rural' areas where, according to the local government based definition of rural, 32% of the Northern Ireland population live.
- Rural poverty exists amongst relative affluence.
- People in rural communities are less likely to identify they are in poverty and there is a culture of "making do".
- In 2007-08 in Northern Ireland, of those who earned 50% below the United Kingdom (UK) Mean Income Before Housing Costs, almost half (46% of individuals) lived in rural areas.<sup>2</sup>
- 54% of households living in rural areas were in Fuel Poverty.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> New Policy Institute (2009) *Monitoring poverty and social exclusion in Northern Ireland 2009*

<sup>2</sup> Source Family Resources Survey Urban Rural Report Northern Ireland 2007-2008 (DSDNI)

<sup>3</sup> 2009 Northern Ireland House Condition Survey Statistical Annex NIHE

With regard to the above consultation, Rural Community Network would like to highlight problems caused by poor coverage and high frequency of mobile and broadband 'not spots' around Rural Northern Ireland. This has an effect on:

- Households
- Children and young people in terms of education
- Business development
- Farmers and farm business
- Older people
- Balanced regional development
- Rural business opportunities
- Working from home
- The location/development of new business and trade enterprises
- The development of various health screening technologies

Broadband and mobile 'not spots' are particularly frequent in border areas with the Republic of Ireland where the issue is compounded by roaming of services and increased costs.

RCN recommends that Ofcom reviews the coverage obligation i.e. a minimum 2Mbps downlink service, covering 95% of UK population, to 90% of indoor locations by end of 2017 which are currently applied at a UK National level.

This serves to reinforce rural disadvantage and isolation. The coverage target needs to be set at a regional geographic level to ensure an equitable service is available for rural dwellers and businesses in Northern Ireland. The difference that a geographic coverage obligation would make to Northern Ireland would be to reduce the disadvantage and disparity that is felt in rural areas - it would also provide an improved telecommunications infrastructure which would aid the economic development of the region.