



Public Consultation to inform Ireland's new National Digital Strategy

1. Please give your name and organisation if applicable (your personal details will only be used for verification purposes)

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The responses set out below are on behalf of communities and individuals across the Western Region. The WDC, under the aegis of the Department of Rural and Community Development, has a statutory remit for the promotion of the economic and social development of the seven counties of Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Mayo, Galway and Clare.



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2. What are the most important areas the Strategy should focus on? (please pick a maximum of three)
- Digital Infrastructure
 - Trust, Security and Privacy
 - Inclusion and Wellbeing
 - Digital Public Services
 - Data Sharing
 - Innovation and Growth
 - Labour Market Changes
 - Education and Skills
 - Other (please specify)

The benefits of the new Digital Strategy can be achieved across all areas listed above, however there is a spatial divide in the realisation of these benefits.

There is also an economic and social divide whereby disadvantaged communities have more limited access. This is compounded by an older demographic profile in many parts of the Western Region and across rural areas nationally.

Spatial Issues

The Western Region is a predominantly rural region; almost two thirds of the population live outside settlements of 1,500 people (Census of Population, 2016). The definition of rural areas as outside towns with a population of 10,000 covers 80% of the population in the Western Region and 50% nationally.

The spatial divide largely relates to broadband access and historical broadband adoption and therefore digital infrastructure is of priority importance.

Economic/social divide

Ensuring the Digital Strategy focusses on improving **inclusion and wellbeing** of all sections of economic and social disadvantage will be for the betterment of all and will support greater adoption and take-up of digital services.

A focus on **innovation and growth** at a regional and sub regional level will ensure that the best opportunities particular to each region/community can be realised.

For example innovative ideas such as PostGov should be promoted in those communities with lower levels of broadband access and adoption.



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3. What are the main opportunities and challenges of digital transformation for Ireland?

Considering the Western Region specifically, **opportunities** include;

Greater market access

A problem for rural areas is often a limited local market because the population is smaller. However, there is significant potential in the global market, in particular for services and 'experiences' or quality products with strong local connections and 'stories'. Such products, with a focus on their local qualities can, with innovative development and marketing, take advantage of global opportunities and allow more growth in rural regions.

Diverse employment types

Rural areas have a mixture of employment types but have significant levels of self-employment and entrepreneurship and have previously proven quick to respond to available opportunities. This is evidenced by the rapid population growth in most rural areas during the 'celtic tiger' period. Relatively limited job options, especially in rural areas, means that more people have to create their own job. The development of entrepreneurship and support for self-employment and other forms of employment in rural areas will help maintain rural populations.

Focussing on rural dwellers, a study conducted for Vodafone in 2016 found that nearly one in four broadband users in rural Ireland use the internet at home in relation to their work and one third have remote access to their company network. An estimated 150,000 rural workers avoid commuting some or all of the time because they can connect to work remotely.

Companies operating e-working policies do so to retain key personnel as well as being able to access a larger labour market. For example, Pramerica (www.pramerica.ie) based in Letterkenny, employs approximately 1,300. The company operates a policy of teleworking and some staff live and work as far away as Limerick and Kerry.

The current reality of 'work' is much more varied than the traditional narrow definition of 'work' as a full-time permanent employee travelling every day to a specific work location. Self-employment, the 'gig' or 'sharing' economy, contract work, freelancing, e-Working, multiple income streams and online business are all trends enabled by new technologies and are dramatically redefining the concept of work, enterprise, and their physical location. This trend is likely to continue and presents an opportunity for the Western Region.



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(Q3 cont'd.) What are the main opportunities and challenges of digital transformation for Ireland?

Challenges

Considering the Western Region specifically, the main **challenges** include;

1. Ensuring the capacity (infrastructure & services) is available.

There is a significant imbalance in the equity of digital services; urban centres are generally well served but rural areas have poorer service levels and limited competition and investment. Census 2016 Summary results show that overall, 76.2 per cent of the State's urban households had broadband compared with 61.1 per cent of households in rural areas.

2. Ensuring the digital capacity and know how is available to ensure the widest degree of participation.

Rural communities can face particular challenges due to the demographic composition of their communities, the structure of their economies and their access to and ability to adopt new technologies. However, it is important to recognise that all rural areas and rural communities are not the same. There are differences in remoteness and accessibility, in the influence of large urban centres and their connections to it and in the natural resource assets and in their access to infrastructures.

See answers to Question 4 also.



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4. Is there anything stopping you as a citizen from using more digital technology in any aspect of your life?

Poor Broadband Speeds

There is a significant imbalance in the equity of digital services; urban centres are generally well served but rural areas have poorer service levels and limited competition and investment. Census 2016 Summary results show that overall, 76.2 per cent of the State's urban households had broadband compared with 61.1 per cent of households in rural areas.

Better infrastructure and broadband services

SMEs in the Western Region can face significant infrastructural deficits which impact on their costs or capacity to run their businesses. The opportunity cost of poor infrastructure is hard to estimate but undoubtedly it can have a significant negative effect on SMEs. Fast broadband and good quality mobile phone coverage are essential for those in business. In the Government's National Digital Strategy, it is estimated that 70% of online spending leaks out of Ireland. The most recent survey on Digital Health¹, noted improvement in that 17% of SMEs are now 'offline', down from 25%. Irish consumers spend over €6.5 billion online but only 29% of SME websites can take sales orders online and only 25% can process payments online. Meanwhile 3 in 4 consumers say that they are more likely to purchase from a business that has an online presence. One of the key constraints is poor internet access and 27% of SMEs without a website say it is because they do not have a good internet connection. **At a regional level the same survey found that 14% of Irish SMEs rate their internet connection as 'poor' or 'very poor' and this figure rises to 25% in Connacht and Ulster.**

Disadvantaged communities in particular need access and skills. (see Question 5 also).

¹ <https://www.iedr.ie/uploads/2014/04/dot-ie-Digital-Health-Index-Q2-2016.pdf>



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5. What supports do communities and businesses need to benefit fully from the use of digital technology?

Businesses need **better infrastructure and broadband services** and **skills training** in supporting trading on-line (see Question 4 also).

Skills Training

Communities that are not fully engaged need supports to access, learn and most importantly **regularly apply** the skills training they receive. As with any new skill, a 'use it or lose it' concept applies.

Adoption and application of new learning is likely to require 'a little and often' approach in recognition that a 'use it or lose it' approach applies. The focus therefore should be given to using the internet on a regular basis as well as those tasks that occur more infrequently, on an annual basis such as booking a holiday or paying motor tax on line. Those tasks (and benefits) which can be undertaken and realised on a more frequent basis will help ensure greater take-up.

Initiatives such as GP services online, especially in rural areas, where access can require longer journeys with limited public transport. Even basic online consultations will help deliver services to rural communities (many of which are suffering from limited GP services). This will promote more frequent use than annual transactions.



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6. What do you see as the main benefits and barriers to using online Government services?

Benefits

The main benefits to online access are the easier access to services by rural and remote rural communities. Geography will no longer determine access to services and rural and urban areas will have more equal access. In the absence of broadband, access would favour those close to the physical service such as local authority offices.

Companies in more regional and rural locations will have potential global access in their market reach.

Barriers

A key barrier is sometimes infrequent use and lack of familiarity. For example some Government online services need only be accessed on an annual basis (for example motor taxation). This in itself is a good thing, but due to lack of familiarity it can mean that for the infrequent user, it feels like they are starting all over again and they can become disillusioned.

Support in using services which would entail more frequent access would help greater adoption over the medium to long-term.



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7. If you have any additional thoughts or comments, please include them here.

Initiatives such as the PostGov facility in post offices could generate greater benefits if there was on-site training made available, especially among rural communities.

On-site training could ensure greater take-up of PostGov in the first instance and greater independent online adoption over the medium term.

For further information please contact

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