

# **Speech by Commissioner Phil Hogan at the "Going Local 2015" event on Rural Broadband**

**- National Digital Centre, Dublin**

**28<sup>th</sup> September 2015**

- Check Against Delivery –

- Commissioner Cretu, Minister White, Minister Phelan, Ladies and gentlemen,
- It is a pleasure to be with you here today to discuss an issue of crucial importance for both Irish and European policymakers.
- Rural areas and the communities living in them will have a central role to play in the smart, sustainable economies of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

- And let me say that this is a truly positive development. Rural areas are no longer viewed as problems to be addressed reactively – they are increasingly viewed as holding many of the solutions to modern challenges.
- We are therefore seeking new and better ways to empower them to play a full part in addressing multiple policy areas, including food security, renewable energy, environmental sustainability and water provision, to name but a few.
- And as Commissioner Cretu has rightly pointed out: providing genuine connectivity is the bottom line if we are serious about achieving this.
- In the agri-food sector, developing and using technological innovations for precision farming requires rapid connection to the internet. Recent economic developments and globalisation trends have shown that the sector - both primary and agri-food - needs to increase productivity and become more competitive, and fast internet access will be a key driver.

- A variety of small and medium-sized business opportunities will be available to any area when full connectivity is realised, no matter how remote. This will incentivise rural dwellers to stay in their local areas as well as attracting new residents.
- The European Commission recognises the importance of rural broadband rollout, and has prioritised it in the EU Digital Single Market package. This is **one of the top 10 political priorities for the 2014-2020 period.**
- The ambition is to close the digital gap between urban and rural areas, by providing fast or ultra-fast broadband across the EU by 2020.
- And I would add, these are not just lofty words: we are adding real value by putting our money where our mouth is.
- **As Commissioner Cretu said, roughly €21.4 billion from the five EU Structural and Investment Funds will be devoted to Information and Communication Technologies. Within this, approximately €6.4 billion EUR will finance the roll-out of high speed broadband.**

- From my own portfolio, the CAP budget will contribute between €1.6 and 2 billion Euro of Rural Development funding. This money will, among other things, fund training for communities so that they are ready to make the most of connectivity when it is in place.
- In order to facilitate both public and private investments, the Commission is preparing a "**Broadband One-Stop Shop**". This will take the form of contact points – both in Brussels and at regional or national level – to respond to requests for help from any public authority wishing to roll out high-speed broadband in its territory. The contact points will encourage and assist the use of loans or other financial instruments. We expect implementation to begin in early 2016 and we welcome Ireland's strong commitment to this structure.
- Picture the scene: **a rural user's experience of using the internet** will be entirely revolutionised with a decent fibre connection. An agri-business entrepreneur will use his high-speed link to develop export opportunities abroad, while having a simultaneous skype call with his bank manager! Meanwhile his daughter is doing her homework using an online module while his mother is being remotely treated by her specialist telemedicine carers from the clinic in the nearest big town.

- This picture is not pie-in-the-sky – it is achievable. There are numerous examples of best practice in rural broadband happening at this very moment. Indeed, one of them is happening right here in Ireland.
- Last Thursday I attended the National Ploughing Championships, where I was honoured to launch a rural broadband trial by the fibre broadband provider SIRO.
- This company is already developing a fibre to the building (of "FTTB") broadband network in a number of Irish regional towns, and has now selected Ratheniska, a small village in County Laois, as a trial centre for high-speed connectivity. This represents an innovative re-use of existing infrastructure (in this case, the national electricity grid).
- Policymakers throughout Europe will watch this trial closely. Ratheniska typifies a rural Irish community, with its local national school, community hall, GAA club, farming community and smattering of local entrepreneurs.
- So let's see what the village can do when given the fastest fibre connection in the country!

- With broadband speeds of up to 1 gigabit, Ratheniska's connection will be 4 times faster than the fastest connection in Dublin. Indeed, it will be on a par with some of the world's leading cities, such as Tokyo and Hong Kong.
- This opens up a whole new world of possibilities for job creation. It means that a small rural community can be a full partner in shaping its place in the modern economy.
- There are many ways to attain connectivity. Where national providers are slow to deliver, local communities have in some cases taken matters into their own hands. In rural Lancashire, a project called Broadband for the Rural North will have connected 5,000 properties in 35 outlying parishes by the end of 2015, with an impressive local take-up rate of 65% for the service.
- This success story came about because the local community came together: local residents have managed every stage of the process, developing a share-based funding model; laying the cables and providing a voluntary help service when B4RN customers have computer or tablet problems.

- So let us take these examples and reproduce their success throughout Ireland and throughout Europe.
- I believe, like my colleague Commissioner Cretu, that rural connectivity will open up the global economy to local areas, while providing local areas with a direct link into the modern, globalised world.
- Achieving these online connections will require us to establish strong offline connections, between policymakers, service providers, rural communities and financial institutions. Events like this one are an important step on that journey. I wish everyone here today the very best of luck in your discussions.

