Macra na Feirme

RURAL ONLINE:

The Future of Work in Rural Ireland

Contents

Aim of Future of Work policy document

Promote more remote working opportunities in rural Ireland.

Improve access to education to promote job opportunities.

Encourage the development of SME's and indigenous enterprise in rural Ireland.

Ensure a viable pool of skilled employees based in rural Ireland.

To ensure residents of rural areas have access to sustainable, fulfilling work which provides a living wage.

Ensuring a better work life balance for those in rural areas.

Encouraging the development and revitalisation of rural communities through improved access to broadband and rural work opportunities.

Foreword

Covid-19 has had an impact on each and every one of us, whether it be from how we do our shopping to how we work and go to school. Many of us have had to adopt a new normal as we work remotely, but it has not been without its own difficulties. This pandemic has accelerated the move to working remotely, and has thrown up challenges which must be addressed sooner rather than later. As we slowly travel back to the towns and cities from which some of us said goodbye to our one year ago to, many people will remain working from home. The difficulties we accepted while at home, will be tolerated less in the future and so we must make sure that everyone is on an equal playing field, because the world as we knew it is gone and won't be coming back so we must move forward and embrace the change for the success of rural Ireland and for ourselves.

Within this document, the Macra na Feirme Rural Youth Future of Work Working Group have outlined their vision for the Future of Work in Ireland and what they believe to be the best solutions to achieve this vision. This vision focuses on three issues which will continue to be vitally important to workers across Ireland, broadband, working hubs and work-life balance.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take the opportunity to recognise the contributions to development of this policy which is so essential to both young people and the future of rural Ireland. The contributions of both the wider Rural Youth policy sub-committee of Macra na Feirme during the 2020-21 term alongside the specific contributions of the 'Future of Work' working group. The committee chairperson Shane Quigley has provided vital leadership along with the work of the working group lead Helen Hayes, members Fergus O'Rourke, Patrick Jordan, Niamh Farrell. This document would not have been possible without the work of the Rural Youth sub-committee liaison Debbie Donnelly and policy officer Gillian Richardson.

Thomas Duffy
Macra na Feirme National President 2019-21

Broadband in Ireland

Introduction

There are many issues that Ireland faces due to weak broadband. These issues range from restrictions on businesses and their inability to expand into rural areas, employment and educational impacts on youth, and the economic decline in an age of information technology, which, inherently, is heavily centred around high-speed internet. This shows the importance of heavy commitments by the government towards policies, plans, and partnerships dedicated to rolling out highspeed broadband across the country in order to combat digital inequality, digital poverty, and most importantly the high concentration of urban populations leading to economic issues and the decline of rural Ireland.

> ## Objective
> **High-speed Broadband available to all homes throughout Ireland and upgrading of the current mobile network to 5G nationwide.**

This is particularly relevant to Macra na Feirme and rural young people as in the age of globalisation, where the internet has become a virtual encyclopaedia, access to immediate knowledge and technology has the potential to improve their employment opportunities along with farming and its development towards sustainability. This would also be aided by access to government resources, recent news and practices, and policies related to rural economies and farming that would aid in rural development.

Justification

Broadband has become the most frequently used form of internet access to date. High-speed internet data is transferred through a variety of different means, ranging anywhere from DSL and Wi-Fi to fibre optics. There are many reasons why broadband is so important, especially when considering the more rural areas of Ireland and the effects wider broadband availability can have on countryside professions, such as farming and facilitating those that can access an option to work remotely. Currently 64% of rural Ireland feel let down and dissatisfied by broadband strength and availability, according to research undertaken by Coyne Research (Irish Tech News, 2019).

Commerce, education, health, and energy are a few of the many important sectors to consider in this regard; high-speed internet is integral to the success of any business, including those of rural areas. By keeping internet access limited in these areas, learning experiences that could have otherwise been afforded to farmers become exclusively available to more urban populations, as well as hindering socio-economic development and welfare through a lack of telemedicine and increased employment

opportunities from higher levels of interconnected communities. Not only can the above-mentioned issues be solved by making broadband more readily available and accessible to rural parts of Ireland, it also offers business cheaper alternatives to relocate to these parts and foster more investment and employment opportunities, as well as tax revenue.

Inequality of broadband access is a major issue in Ireland. This is because it hinders economic development in the outskirts of more urbanised communities, and effects rural farmers by severely, if not completely, limiting access to critical information, such as new government policies and services, or farming practices and news that could prove beneficial to their operations. This also contributes to the lack of farm development and technological upgrades. These are additional issues with education and employment, as the result of a lack of broadband in rural Ireland which contributes to lower computer literacy rates in comparison to urban populations. This also undermines the use of electronic equipment in rural schools, due to little or no internet. The loss of approximately 10,000 jobs due to poor broadband services, is estimated by the Irish Rural Network (McGreevy, 2015).

According to research undertaken by Coyne Research, on behalf of Imagine Communications, 58% of broadband users are not satisfied with current broadband services, while only 21% of rural Ireland are satisfied with the current state of broadband, and approximately 60% of rural Ireland feel that higher-quality broadband would increase their quality of life (Irish Tech News, 2019). Approximately 35% of Irish establishments have broadbands at speeds of 10Mbps, while approximately 69% of homes in the country have broadband speeds faster than 4Mbps, which itself is quite low. This places Ireland's broadband rank at 42nd worldwide (McGreevy, 2015).

It is important to consider this data in comparison to rural areas of Ireland, as most businesses promote their broadband at average speeds of 240Mbps, while in rural Ireland it is as low as 1-2Mbps, with 20% of rural villages having broadband speeds lower than 10Mbps and in many areas, non-existent (McGreevy, 2015).

Efforts to date

Macra na Feirme does recognise the efforts made to rolling out broadband. In 2015, the government had promised a broadband plan that would provide access of at least 30Mbps to all areas of Ireland by 2020, with funding being estimated at approximately 500 million euro. Today, those estimates have been raised to approximately 3 billion euro in a contract signed with National Broadband Ireland (NBI) (National Broadband Ireland, 2019). This contract will attempt to build the infrastructure to connect around 540,000 premises (National Broadband Ireland, 2020). The completion of this project is

estimated to be seven years, which is three years sooner than the original estimates, despite early Covid-19 complications (National Broadband Ireland, 2020).

Companies such as Eir plan their own investment of about one billion euro to make broadband readily available in rural areas due to market demand and competition, subcontractors and additional companies working in this field include Nokia, Actavo, KN Group and the Kelly Group.

Multiple attempts have been made to implement surveyors in this process to determine areas with the greatest need for broadband but this has proven difficult, however, due to Covid-19 travel restrictions.

Broadband has been promised particularly in counties such as Galway, Cork, and Cavan (National Broadband Ireland, 2020). This project will aim also aim at targeting counties where broadband has been largely non-existent, such as Mayo and Clare, where past projections of broadband delivery have not yet been properly met.

NBI has been contracted to build a full-fibre network to connect over 537,000 premises, and in 2019 alone, the EU Commission approved 2.6 billion euros of public support for the Irish National Broadband Plan (National Broadband Ireland, 2019).

The NBP's plan of providing high-speed internet, as mentioned above, is yet to be delivered to many; with only 373 premises connected as of March 2021 (Cadogen, 2021). This lack of pace and scale could be connected to the high expense of providing fibre to homes, as well as the disinterest people have in engaging in such programs. This raises important questions that the government would need to tackle, as well as alternatives that they will need to consider regarding the broadband issue.

These plans were originally discussed and set as early as 2012/13 and had been targeted for 2020/21. Though there is still optimism on the earlier rollout of broadband by the estimated dates, they seem unlikely, as new projections suggest that highspeed internet availability may be delayed to as late as 2023.

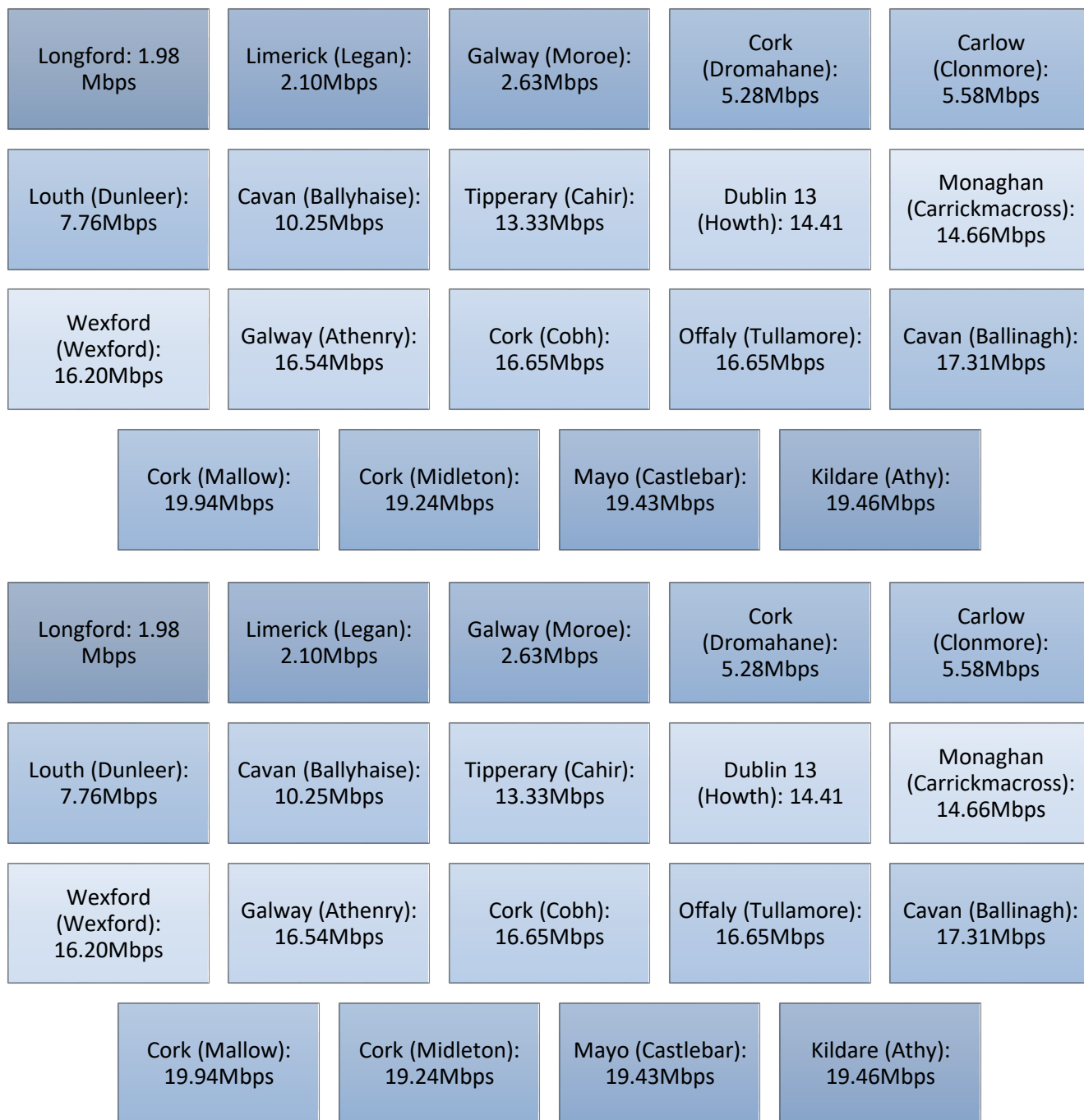**Slowest Average Broadband Speed of Different Counties (2016)**

Longford: 1.98 Mbps	Limerick (Legan): 2.10Mbps	Galway (Moroe): 2.63Mbps	Cork (Dromahane): 5.28Mbps	Carlow (Clonmore): 5.58Mbps
Louth (Dunleer): 7.76Mbps	Cavan (Ballyhaise): 10.25Mbps	Tipperary (Cahir): 13.33Mbps	Dublin 13 (Howth): 14.41	Monaghan (Carrickmacross): 14.66Mbps
Wexford (Wexford): 16.20Mbps	Galway (Athenry): 16.54Mbps	Cork (Cobh): 16.65Mbps	Offaly (Tullamore): 16.65Mbps	Cavan (Ballinagh): 17.31Mbps
	Cork (Mallow): 19.94Mbps	Cork (Midleton): 19.24Mbps	Mayo (Castlebar): 19.43Mbps	Kildare (Athy): 19.46Mbps

Figure 1: Lowest Average Download Speeds (Mbps) (joe.ie, 2017)

Fastest Average Broadband Speeds (2016)

Galway City (Knocknacarra): 62.66Mbps	Clare (Shannon): 51.64Mbps	Tipperary (Thurles): 49.18Mbps

Kildare (Leixlip): 45.74Mbps	Dublin/ Dublin County: Ranges anywhere from 14.41Mbps-72.15 Mbps, with an average of approximately 50Mbps (highest ranges found in Dublin)

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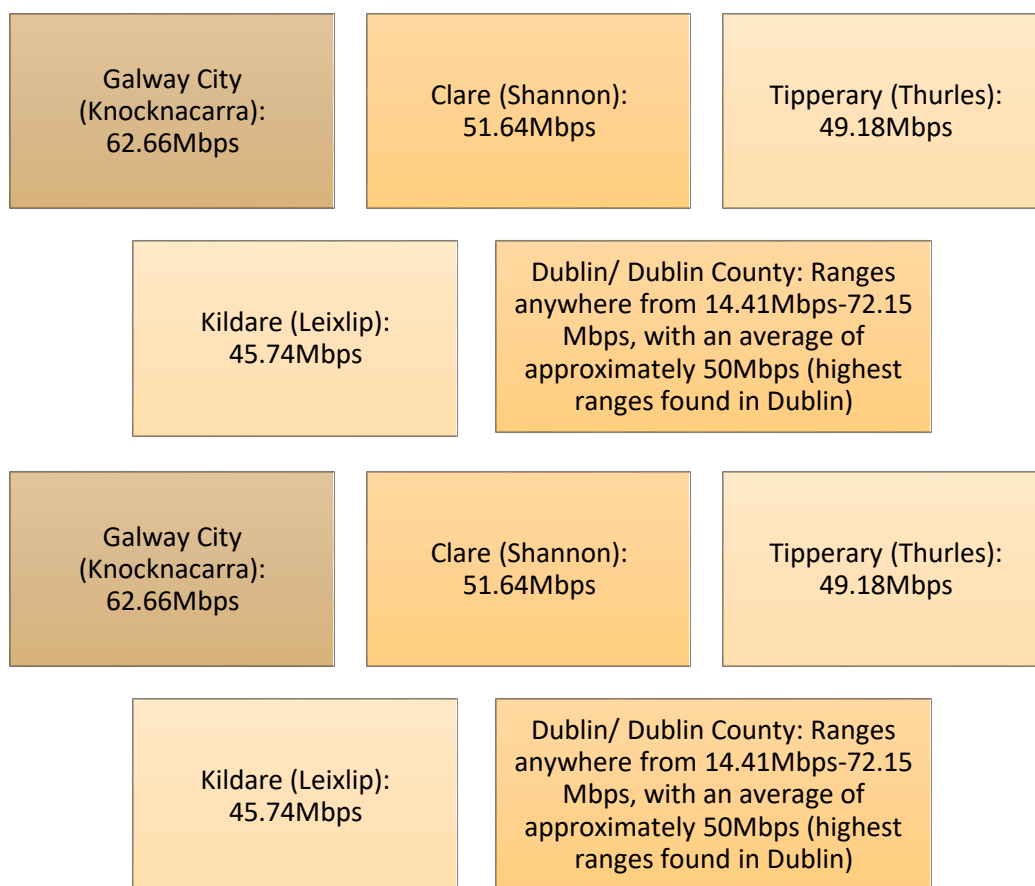|	
Kildare (Leixlip): 45.74Mbps	Dublin/ Dublin County: Ranges anywhere from 14.41Mbps-72.15 Mbps, with an average of approximately 50Mbps (highest ranges found in Dublin)

Figure 2: Fastest Average Download Speeds (Mbps) (joe.ie, 2017)

Broadband and youth

The lack of broadband has a significant effect on the Irish youth in multiple different ways; the most significant of which is to move from rural areas to bigger cities to find work. This causes higher housing prices and job competitions while slowly contributing to the death of rural Ireland. During a conference held in City Hall, organized by the Ombudsman for children, for World Children's day in 2018, multiple rural young people expressed from across Ireland felt like rural Ireland was still in the stone age. Issues surrounding education centred on difficulties with technology, as they would have to travel as far as 18km to have broadband and partake in different courses and online activities. Those interested in subjects such as robotics and coding simply do not have the proper means to gain access to the education needed unless they move into urban areas.

A survey done by Studyclix, showed that 35% of teachers surveyed expressed that "digital poverty" affected to their ability to teach youth in rural (Studyclix, 2020). In county Mayo, the percentage was

as high as 53%, 50% in Wexford, and 48% in Cavan. In addition, 47% of teachers identified the lack of student engagement was due to technological issues (Sligo Champion, 2020).

Other issues that youth face in rural Ireland regarding poor broadband revolve around Covid-19, as most people depend on a fast internet connection to attend classes and, in most cases, work. In the UK, it's estimated that about 95% of premises should be able to access fast broadband; however, an analysis of 189,000 properties done by Ofcom, the UK's communications Regulator, showed that most homes seem to run on a maximum of 10Mbps download speed and only 1Mbps upload speed (Wakefield, 2020). This was shown to heavily affect video quality and could hinder various types of online meetings, school, or even streaming services for entertainment during the pandemic.

Macra na Feirme's experiences

Now it is as important as ever to make quality broadband available to rural areas due to Covid-19 restrictions, as this would especially benefit rural youth working remotely from home. The availability, quality, and cost of broadband are still major obstacles for young people and rural students.

It is important to have quality broadband for small businesses seeking to operate in rural areas. This is seen by the economic decline in small rural towns, as well as retail and education services in rural parts of Cavan and Monaghan.

Broadband is also important due to the phasing out of cheques and cash as alternate payment methods; we see this becoming more prevalent in more developed and industrialized societies. Keeping large parts of Ireland in "blackout" will not only affect internal economic relations but external relations as well.

Recommendations

Increased investment in broadband rollout

In order to aid in the rollout of broadband, as well as improve existing weak connections, more heavy investments in the rollout of broadband, but specifically target areas greatly affected by the lack of internet availability, is needed. Allocating budgets to such endeavours could prove useful. One area that could benefit from such investment is the completion of upgrades to already existing networks such as 3G and 4G, as well as the implementation of 5G.

Substitution of fibre cables

A more cost-neutral solution would be to substitute fibre cables, with these mobile networks, such as 5G. These fibre cables were projected to cost as high as 3 billion euro with subcontractors, to cover approximately 540,000 premises.

Supports for alternative broadband provision

Assuming the time to complete targets by the NBP are reached without additional delays, such as the impact of Covid-19 have had, many households will not be able to access high speed broadband within the next two years. These difficulties are particularly felt by those in more remote rural housing. To address this many households have made investment in alternative broadband solutions such as 4G receivers. These solutions should be supported by a micro-grant scheme for those not estimated to be covered by the NBP until 2022.

Replacement of fibre cables

Replacing fibre cables with wireless optical networks is long viewed as an efficient alternative to fibre. This provides alternate transmission routes at longer ranges and has lower costs due to the use of open-air optical technology.
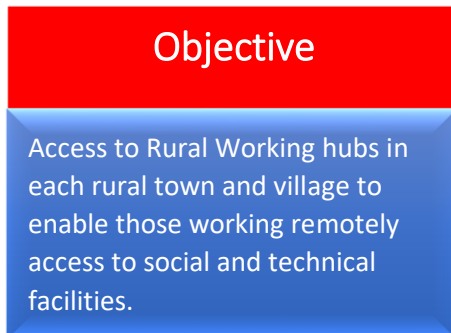
Make use of existing infrastructure

Using existing infrastructure, as suggested by NBP, could also be a cost-efficient solution for the rolling out of broadband to 96% of Ireland's landmass as well as 56,000 farms, 44,000 businesses, and 674 schools at a quicker pace.

Rural Working Hubs

Introduction

Macra na Feirme welcomes the focus placed on remote working concerning jobs and the role of remote working plays both now and into the future. For many young people, the global pandemic has suppressed the experience of learning in a traditional office. The ability for young people to be provided with practical, social and communicative mentoring has been stunted by being forced to work remotely. Macra na Feirme acknowledges and appreciates the increased emphasis placed on remote working in the Programme for government. We also recognise the capabilities of

Objective

Access to Rural Working hubs in each rural town and village to enable those working remotely access to social and technical facilities.

remote working to benefit rural communities in terms of boosting employment in local areas, combating rural decline, and supporting the local economy, while also lessening the time we spend commuting and reducing our carbon footprint. However, in order to ensure that remote working is sustainable and that the young people of Ireland are supported in their careers and aspirations there are several issues that need to be addressed. Macra na Feirme believe Rural hubs have a strong role to play in the future of work.

Justification

Employment

Hubs have the potential to provide remote workers that have been forced to work from home with facilities outside of the main office that are needed to carry out their roles efficiently or effectively. An example of this would be providing a back up to those that may need privacy or reduced noise/ interruptions for important conference calls to clients or colleagues, or access to machinery such as photocopiers that again may not be accessible working from home.

Macra na Feirme insist rural Ireland must not be let fall any farther behind. With Covid-19 already having had severe impacts on the countries state of employment, along with the rollout of high-speed broadband, making hubs sustainable is a priority to ensuring other forms of employment are made available to keep rural Ireland alive.

Macra na Feirme strongly supports the investment of €300,000 by the Department of Rural and Community Development as part of the Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC) Enterprise Hub Network

project (Atlantic Economic Corridor, 2020). Funding has been provided to help 65 hubs implement social distancing guidelines, purchase necessary safety equipment, online meeting equipment and support marketing of the hub network. This is imperative to the success and sustainability of remote working opportunities, and Macra na Feirme would urge the Government to ensure that this investment is not limited to rural areas along the West coast of Ireland but throughout the country.

One of the concerns Macra na Feirme has is in reference to occupancy. Both current and future Remote hubs that are set up must be financially sustainable and capable of catering for the times we live in. For example, to be Covid-19 combatable, space needs to be appropriately set up, to ensure telecommuters can work within a 2-metre distance of each other and that the space available can cater for that without affecting the cost to the employer.

Climate change

Macra na Feirme also appreciates the benefits of rural hubs and digital enterprises in limiting our carbon footprint. We see the opportunities for communities to benefit as shareholders in renewable energy projects along with restructuring and reducing the everyday commute to play an active part in the transition to a low carbon economy. Access to rural hubs will make working closer to home more sustainable, regenerate towns and villages and aid the country in meeting the government targets on climate change.

Mental Well-being

Macra na Feirme wishes to support the development and establishment of more communal workspaces for entrepreneurs and telecommuters currently within rural Ireland and future start-ups and expanding entities. However, while we encourage making remote work more viable and accessible to companies locally, nationally, and internationally, we understand the need to do so without compromising on the social communication needs and aspects of employers and employees.

The institute for employment studies (IES) in the UK released its findings from the first COVID-19 homeworker wellbeing study which was carried out in April 2020. Of the 500 respondents, 50% reported being unhappy with their current work-life balance, and 33% frequently reported feeling isolated. Isolation is interlinked between metal and physical well-being. 64% of respondents reported a loss of sleep due to worry; and a corresponding 60% noted increased symptoms of fatigue; possibly due to working patterns that include long and irregular hours according to almost half (48%) of those who took part in the report (Bevan, Mason, & Bajorek, 2020).

While remote working can help provide a greater work-life balance, similar to farming, one of the main issues remote workers face is isolation. To tackle this issue Macra na Feirme supports education and

building awareness of remote working opportunities in our local communities through the running of regular meetups and events to facilitate connections socially.

Recommendations

In order to address the issues outlined above, Macra na Feirme see the following recommendations, as crucial in creating sustainable workplaces and opportunities across Rural Ireland.

Digital Hubs

Digital Hubs could prove a useful solution and results in better broadband coverage, especially in times of a pandemic. This is a very viable option for the future of broadband, or at the very least, a supplement until alternative methods can be implemented.

The government can take advantage of remote working environments so that rural skilled workers do not migrate to cities; this could provide safe working spaces and promote start-ups in rural Ireland for economic growth. Companies with more flexible work practices can engage in these projects and invest; broadband strength can be targeted at specific hubs; in this way, the rollout can be paced and cost-effective. The government should take advantage of such movements, such as RDIHub to connect all digital hubs in Western Ireland, an area in dire need of broadband, through an ongoing project by AEC.

Digital Hubs can also cause an increase in higher employment rates as jobs become more readily available for not only youth, but older citizens looking for easily accessible and part-time work, with a space that can provide them with the necessary internet connection.

Workplace policy

We support the implementation of strong, productive, positive, and practical policy in the workplace including policy that ensures the safety and well-being of those working remotely are catered for both physically and mentally.

Partnership

We encourage and are supportive of rural community development to partner with local spaces, making uses of facilities already available to them.

Remote working promotion

Macra na Feirme support organisations such as Grow Remote and their vision of being able to "live and participate locally" in creating awareness of opportunities and initiatives to attract remote workers to rural areas, provide remote working employment, and connect those already working remotely in rural Ireland.

Work-Life balance

Introduction

Macra na Feirme represents young workers across the country predominantly in rural areas. Many are employed in roles that have a strong emphasis on the use of electronic communications with the expectation in some instances that they are available during non-work hours.

The right to disconnect refers to a worker's right to be able to disengage from work and refrain from engaging in work-related electronic communications, such as emails or other messages, during non-work hours. The rights of employees to have a clear separation between work hours and personal time has been confirmed both through test cases before the courts (Irish Legal News, 2018) and recent legislation in the form of the Right to Disconnect Code of Practice (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2021).

Objective

To recognise the integrity of all employees and their right to a healthy and sustainable work-life balance.

Justification

Allied Irish Banks (AIB) has agreed what is claimed to be the first right to disconnect policy with the Financial Services Union (FSU) which covers email, meetings, phone calls, Zoom, Teams etc. The policy sets guidelines on the arranging of meetings to avoid disturbing peoples home time and more focused meetings i.e. only those who need to be involved be included. It also emphasises the rights of workers to take an uninterrupted lunch break, when finished work for the day or when on a day off. Setting and respecting out of office notifications and making it normal to delay reply's to late-night emails until the following days' work (Maguire, 2020).

Volkswagen was reportedly the first company to implement a company-wide freeze on out-of-hours emails in 2012. The car manufacturer set its internal servers to refrain from sending emails to individual accounts between 18.15 and 07.00 (EurWORK, 2019).

In 2016, France adopted the "El Khomri law" which offered French employees the right to disconnect from work calls and emails during non-working hours. The Law provided the right to disconnect, but did not define it, and instead told employers to negotiate the specifics concerning the required use of communication tools with employees. If no agreement is reached, the employer may unilaterally implement its own chosen methods for honouring the right to disconnect (Ornstein, Collins, & Glassberg, 2019).

In 2017, Italy enacted a law requiring employers to make clear their employees' need to be responsive outside of normal working hours (Ornstein, Collins, & Glassberg, 2019).

Also, the Philippines' government has introduced a bill providing a right to disconnect after normal hours. Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, India, Québec, and the federal government of Canada have all proposed or considered adopting such a right (Ornstein, Collins, & Glassberg, 2019).

The most recent to follow the trend was Spain, which in November 2018, adopted its "Data Protection and Digital Rights Act." This new act delivers, amongst other things, the right to disconnect during resting periods and holidays (Ornstein, Collins, & Glassberg, 2019).

Recommendations

Right to disconnect policy

Macra na Feirme welcome the recent announcement by the Irish government following the example set by companies and other countries across the world with the introduction of a code of practice on the right to disconnect.

There are three rights in the Code which came into effect this year (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2021):

- o the right of an employee to not have to routinely perform work outside their normal working hours
- o the right not to be penalised for refusing to attend to work matters outside of normal working hours
- o the duty to respect another person's right to disconnect (for example: by not routinely emailing or calling outside normal working hours)

Consultation

The Department of Justice and Equality held a consultation on guidance for remote working in 2020. Macra na Feirme feel that the information gathered in this consultation need to be implemented as soon as possible to ensure that rural workers can be appropriately accommodated for during this pandemic.

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