

Rural telecoms for farmers – the problems and the solutions

By Dave Millett, Equinox

DESPITE the UK having the world's fifth highest GDP it can sometimes feel as though our rural telecoms infrastructure has barely advanced since the dark ages. Farms and other rural businesses suffer from the unholy trinity of no phone coverage, no or very slow broadband and the expense of running in dedicated services.

So, what telecoms options do farming businesses have?

Internet

In 2011 the government set up the Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) project, with the aim of bringing superfast broadband to 95 per cent of the country by 2017. That missing five per cent represents 1.25 million homes.

Small fibre and Wimax providers are popping up throughout the country. The fibre providers offer speeds of up to 1Gb, and because

they're pure fibre, there's no need for a landline – but they're incredibly restricted in terms of availability.

You can find what is going on in Scotland here: <https://www.cable.co.uk/guides/rural-broadband/>

Farms can look at dedicated lines as they guarantee speeds. The problem is that, unlike standard broadband, pricing is distance dependent. A small business in a remote part of Dumfries and Galloway found the best price was over £1,000 a month for a 10mb circuit. The Government has announced some planned help for businesses in rural areas but full details are yet to emerge.

Mobile

All the networks offer online checkers for their coverage. These are worth consulting as each network will have strong and weak areas. But with only 95 per cent coverage, that leaves over 1.25 million premises without mobile

phone access.

If you have fast enough broadband then you can plug in a booster in order to improve the signal. If the coverage maps say you should get indoor service and you are not, then the network provider will usually give you a booster for free – if you push them and tell them you are leaving as they are not meeting their commitments.

One step Ofcom and the Government could take to improve rural coverage is to force the networks to allow free roaming within the UK. From July 1st 2017 you will be able to roam free in Europe but not in the UK. The networks have resisted this step – the Government should now take action to force them and this would reduce the number of not spots.

Phone Lines

If you don't have a phone line at your premises then BT is required to install lines at the standard price even it involves extra costs.

But there is a catch; they will only cover extra costs up to £3,400 for phone lines and £1,000 for ISDN2 connections excluding VAT. Anything above that and the customer has to pay.

For one of our clients buying a farm in Scotland those extra costs came in at over 20k – making a landline installation prohibitively expensive. Therefore, their only option was to use satellite for their business, and rely on their mobile signal rather than a landline.

Whilst it could be argued that it is unfair on BT to force them to swallow the extra costs of supplying a remote property, it would seem fairer if this work was done at cost – not as a separate profit making venture, as is currently the case.

The good news is that the costs of satellite broadband have now come down to under £100 a month – making it much more accessible for rural businesses.

In summary, the choices still

remain relatively restricted for most rural farming businesses but it does pay to explore all the options. A high percentage of people have not opted in for fibre broadband even when it is available. It is important to check its availability regularly and check the mobile coverage maps as networks are changing where they offer service.

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Pizzeria spreads its Little Wings

HOMEGROWN pizzeria chain Little Wing has announced an investment of \$500,000 in two new restaurants in Lisburn and Newtownards, creating up to 40 new jobs. The major investment will bring the number of branches of Little Wing across Northern Ireland to eight.

Further sites are currently being explored across the Province, with ambitious plans to open several new Little Wing Pizzerias in the next 12 months, while options are also being considered in the Republic of Ireland.

The newest restaurant, located at Lisburn Square, will cater for 60 guests when it opens this summer, with a further restaurant scheduled to open in Newtownards later this year.

Established in Belfast in October 2009, Little Wing prides itself in offering authentic, made to order Naples-style pizzas, cooked in its distinctive 6ft traditional woodstone pizza ovens.

Sourcing the freshest and finest ingredients is at the heart of the Little Wing ethos, with 100 per cent mozzarella cheese used on its pizzas; sauce made from San Marzano tomatoes, grown in volcanic soil near Naples and picked at peak ripeness; and dough made to Little Wing's own secret recipe.

Over the past seven and a half years, Little Wing has gone from strength to strength, developing a cult following and selling over 1,250,000 pizzas to date.

The Lisburn branch is expected to open in August and will employ up to 20 new members of staff, bringing the total number of people employed across all Little Wing outlets to over 130. The addition of the

Newtownards restaurant later this year, will bring the number of employees to 150.

Commenting on the announcement, Luke Wolsey, Managing Director, Little Wing Pizzeria, said: "We are excited to announce this latest investment, which we hope will be the first of several new Little Wing openings over the next 12 months.

"Building on the success of our growing network of restaurants across Northern Ireland, the new Little Wing Pizzerias in Lisburn and Newtownards will help the brand to spread its wings further as we seek more opportunities to expand the business in the coming years.

"Little Wing provides real and meaningful long term career opportunities for people that are passionate about hospitality and customer service and we're proud to bring a jobs boost, with the creation of up to 40 new jobs this year."

The new Little Wing Pizzeria will be located at Lisburn Square and will open daily after it opens later this summer. Further details on the Newtownards restaurant will be announced soon.

Little Wing will begin recruiting for a number of positions, including or management positions, waiting staff, pizza chefs and kitchen porters in the coming weeks. Full details are available at www.littlewingcareers.com

Little Wing is part of the Beannchor Group, Ireland's largest hospitality group, which boasts a portfolio of over 40 pubs, hotels and restaurants across Northern Ireland.

□ For further information visit littlewingpizzeria.com



■ ABOVE: A £500,000 investment in two new Little Wing restaurants in Lisburn and Newtownards will create up to 40 new jobs.

■ LEFT: Luke Wolsey, Managing Director, Little Wing Pizzeria.

Maintaining the Single Electricity Market 'Brexit' priority says NI Chamber

PROTECTING the all-island electricity market and the introduction of the Integrated-Single Electricity Market must be a priority in upcoming 'Brexit' negotiations.

That was the message delivered by Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry (NI Chamber) at the latest NI Chamber/SONI Energy Forum held at Newry's Norbrook Laboratories.

The business organisation, which represents over 1,200 members from across Northern Ireland, says the Single Electricity Market offers significant benefits to consumers, including businesses and employers throughout the region and that it must be at the forefront of the Prime Minister's Brexit strategy.

Introduced in 2007, the Single Electricity Market was designed to achieve more efficient electricity prices for consumers across the island.

■ LEFT: Robin McCormick, General Manager of SONI, Kirsty McManus, Head of Business Development at NI Chamber, and Liam Nagle, Chief Executive at Norbrook.

says NI Chamber

Looking ahead, the Integrated-Single Electricity Market will be implemented in 2018 to build upon the success of the current all-island market and create even greater levels of competition, resulting in a downward pressure on the cost of electricity for everyone.

Speaking at the event, Kirsty McManus, Head of Business Development at Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said: "Great strides have been made in many aspects of North South co-operation ranging from health, agriculture and energy. It is important that any negotiations between the UK and EU ensure that those strong ties with the Republic of Ireland on issues of major importance to both sides of the border are not eroded.

"There is a need to underline the importance of the all island energy market in ongoing negotiations. Implementation of the I-SEM will increase competition in the all-island electricity market and provide further benefits

to consumers. NI Chamber also continues its strong support for the North South Interconnector – a project that will benefit business consumers throughout Northern Ireland and when operational will be the lynchpin of the all island electricity market."

Robin McCormick, General Manager of SONI, said: "At SONI, we make sure that business has the power to thrive and so our role is essential in supporting the local economy.

"We do this through the delivery of important infrastructure projects such as the North South Interconnector, which will bring direct benefits to businesses everywhere; ensuring a secure supply of electricity and putting downward pressure on costs.

"The interconnector is also critical to ensuring that the I-SEM will function efficiently. "The need and rationale for both of these projects remain regardless of Brexit.

"The implementation of the I-SEM and the strengthening of the all-island market arrangements make good economic sense for everyone."

