

Major study reveals impact of gap in Internet access between rural and urban area in Britain

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The gap between urban and rural Internet speeds risks damaging business, adding to farming costs, driving young people away from areas

in which they have grown-up, and deterring retirees from moving to some areas of the country.

These are the conclusions of a detailed academic study into [internet access](#) by the dot.rural RCUK Digital Economy Research Hub at the University of Aberdeen, and the Oxford Internet Institute at the University of Oxford, as part of the Oxford Internet Surveys.

They have published a report 'Two-Speed Britain: Rural Internet Use' based on the most detailed survey so far of rural Internet users, which shows that more than one million people in Britain are excluded or face challenges in engaging in normal online activities because they live in remote [rural areas](#) not linked up with high-speed broadband.

By looking separately at 'deep rural' (remote), 'shallow rural' (less remote) and urban Internet users, researchers say they are able to highlight the true nature of this divide.

They found that in urban areas just five per cent of those sampled had an average broadband speed below 6.3 Mbits/sec. However, in deep rural areas, over half (53 %) of people were unable to achieve this modest speed at which an album of 10 songs would typically take about one minute to download, 200 photographs a little over four minutes, and a movie about 18 minutes.

Professor John Farrington, of the University of Aberdeen and lead author of the report, said their findings indicated the scale of the problem for deep rural areas in particular, and that the digital gap is currently widening, rather than closing.

"This report clearly demonstrates there is a growing social and economic gap between those who are connected and those who are not, the 'digitally excluded'," he said. "It is generally seen in differences between

remote rural internet use on the one hand, and less remote, rural and urban internet use on the other.

"This broadband speed gap between urban and especially deep rural areas is widening: it will begin to narrow as superfast reaches more rural areas but better-connected, mostly urban, areas will also increase speeds at a high rate. This means faster areas will probably continue to get faster, faster with slow speed areas left lagging behind."

Principal investigator of the Oxford Internet Surveys, Professor William Dutton, from the University of Oxford, said: "This is the first time we have captured data to clearly show the depth of the divide between those living in remote rural parts of Britain and the rest of the country. The digital gap is not just due to age, income or education. We show that slower broadband speeds are barring many rural communities from engaging in the social or commercial online opportunities enjoyed by those in towns and cities."

The report shows the gap is most pronounced in upland areas of Scotland, Wales and England, but also in many areas in lowland rural Britain. It affects 1.3 million people in deep rural Britain, and many more in less remote areas with poor Internet connection: 9.2 million people live in 'shallow' rural areas.

Professor Farrington added: "Rural businesses are penalised because they are unable to take advantage of the commercial efficiencies afforded by the Internet, as in the creative industries, or have to resort to the use of paper systems which are more costly, as in the farming sector where there is a push to move administration such as sheep registrations online.

"All these issues can potentially create a new tipping point for digitally poorly connected rural areas, including: losing businesses; adding to

farming's costs; making out-migration more likely for [young people](#); and in-migration less likely for retirees or the economically active."

He said that the issue needs to be addressed if the UK Government agenda of Digital by default', with government services being delivered online, is to be achieved.

"There is a drive to make public services ranging from registering to vote to applying for a visa or making a tax return 'digital by default', and simpler, clearer and faster to use," he added.

"Based on the findings of our report, this can't be achieved until better connection is universal. The 'universal' broadband target of 2 Mbits/sec will be inadequate to fulfil this aim.

"An element of policy should be to improve the interface between public, private and community efforts in improving deep rural [broadband speeds](#)."

Provided by University of Aberdeen

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