

**Opening Session:**  
**OPENING SPEECH FOR CLLR JOHN DAVIES**  
**Leader of the**  
**Welsh Local Government Association &**  
**Pembrokeshire County Council**  
*(Check against delivery)*

I am John Davies, Leader of Pembrokeshire County Council and the Welsh Local Government Association. It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all to Technium Pembrokeshire for this Welsh Assembly Government – Welsh Local Government Association – Ofcom - WALES FORUM ON EUROPE event - "***Delivering broadband to rural Europe***".

I want to start today's conference by extending a warm greeting to all of our speakers who have travelled across Europe and the rest of the UK to be with us today. They are all experts ***in addressing rural broadband issues*** and come from public, private and the community sectors. In particular, I would like to introduce our speakers for this first session **Cllr Bob Bright** WLGAs Full Member of the EU Committee of the Regions and Member from Newport City Council and **Rhodri Williams** the Director of Ofcom Wales.

At this stage some of you might be wondering what are OPEN DAYS 2009. I am happy to say that I am much clearer since my first visit to Brussels last week. OPEN DAYS is an initiative in its sixth year that took place in Brussels last week between all the EUs key institutions and local and regional government. Under the banner of **Global Challenges,**

**European responses** we were able to meet experts and fellow European politicians to discuss openly the challenges that face us all and find out more about what is happening in Brussels in response. In particular our discussions focused on the EU budget after 2013 and all the implications for agriculture, rural development and structural funds programmes here in Wales.

Turning to the topic for today, the development of broadband infrastructure is now recognised as a key enabler for economic, social and educational improvement of our rural communities. With a technology neutral approach, broadband technologies can play a significant role in promoting entrepreneurship and economic progress and therefore contribute to competitiveness, adding value, improving quality of life and further facilitating rural diversification.

Recent technological advances and planned infrastructure programmes announced by the major communications providers reflect the ever-improving delivery of broadband based services. Roll-out of these advancements will respond to commercial forces from the population centres and major businesses based around the urban centres rather than rural areas resulting inevitably in an uneven spread and pace of change which will have an adverse impact on rural Wales if this goes unchecked.

There are increasing concerns that the rural communities of Wales are being left further behind in the provision of broadband infrastructure and associated services with **Digital Exclusion** leading to a potential impact on the social and economic wellbeing of communities.

In recognition of this concern, I am pleased to confirm that the WLGA Rural Forum have recently commissioned and completed a report to analyse the key economic, social and educational issues affecting broadband provision in rural Wales. Its conclusions and recommendations will be published in the next few weeks but suffice to say we believe that we should have better intelligence about the actual situation on the ground, facilitate better communication between national strategies and local stakeholders and take advantage of the new EU state aid rules and funding opportunities for broadband to better target and support rural areas of market failure in Wales.

In the context of the economic crisis that faces us, the EU Economic Recovery Package published by the Commission last November has already led to a raft of changes to structural funds and rural development programmes with additional resources being deployed from the EU budget to target amongst other key priorities "smart investments" in broadband infrastructure and the knowledge based society.

Recognising this opportunity, I am pleased to welcome Cllr Bob Bright who played a key role for the WLGA earlier in the year by piloting his report, on the future of universal service and its extension to minimum broadband service provision post 2010, through the EU Committee of the Regions. Visiting the Committee last week, I was able to see at first hand the good work which goes on there. The CoR is an advisory committee that inputs views to the European Commission on the local and regional implications of future proposals – and will play an increasingly important role if the Lisbon Treaty comes into being!

So what are we seeking to achieve today?

I hope that we might learn how modifications and additional funds through EU structural funds and the rural development plan might be best targeted to help rural Wales;

Also that today we may go some way to better understanding how we in Wales can learn from best practice and benchmark our progress against other regions elsewhere in Europe and the wider world. In Brussels, I attended with Cllr Bright a seminar on broadband roll out and uptake strategies across Europe where Castilla-la-Mancha in Spain and Piedemonte in Italy demonstrated impressive coverage and bandwidth results flowing from their strategic plans. I was particularly impressed by a satellite broadband initiative that has connected 4000 of most isolated mountain huts all of which are 2700 metre above sea level! It's worth mentioning that Piedemonte have a 96% coverage that boasts minimum service provision in excess of 1MB!

I hope that in the time available to us today we too can explore other approaches both from other UK and EU regions. On that note, I would particularly like to welcome *Alderman* **Geert Jan Ten Brink** from the Municipality of Aa en Hunze in the Netherlands and the Dutch Local Government Associations' lead portfolio member on Information Society and eGovernment and **Senor Bittor Oroz**, Mayor of Ataun Council and Member of the Executive Committee of Basque Local Government Association and spokesperson for rural development who is supported today by **Iñigo Gomez**.

As for our existing national broadband coverage, no doubt many of you will have seen in the media last week that the UK is falling into 25<sup>th</sup> place globally on the basis of a survey conducted by CISCO. In Brussels last week, we learnt that whilst the EU is envisaging a universal download of 2MBs, South Korea and Taiwan are moving towards 40MBs as the race towards Next Generation Access moves on.

The European Union is increasingly becoming a driving factor for improvements in the digital economy through both regulatory and economic incentives. In the recently published five year plan, Commission President Jose Manuel Barosso, refers to a '**European Digital Agenda**', as an integral part of the new post Lisbon development agenda. It will be responsible for driving forward European competitiveness and assist the regulators in monitoring developments.

Clearly the agenda for rural Europe is one of increased coverage, increasing bandwidth and the uptake of broadband services by identifying where the public and private sectors can come together.

Bob and I met with Ken Ducatel from the European Commission last week and we will share with you today what we gathered from him on this this key issue for Wales.

