

How 3 is helping residents of remote and rural parts of Ireland enjoy the benefits of broadband

By Jon Marsh



Windswept cliffs on the Aran Islands.

Ireland Calling

THE RUGGED, WINDSWEPT ARAN ISLANDS along Ireland's west coast are home to a population which has long grown used to doing without many of the amenities of modern life. The three islands, situated at the mouth of Galway Bay, enjoy a long cultural history going back centuries; even today, Gaelic is still widely spoken.

The total number of residents is counted in hundreds and they are often outnumbered by day-trippers in summer. During winter, howling gales sweep over the rugged cliffs and rocky fields. The economy relies on tourists who come across on the ferry to visit the Iron Age forts, down a pint of Guinness or two at the local pub and buy souvenirs at the handful of local shops. The islands' most enduring symbol is the hand-knit fisherman's Aran sweater and the patterns incorporated in traditional Aran hand knitting have been handed down from mother to daughter for generations.

It's a place for hardy folk whose many might say lead lives that are more than a little isolated. But things are changing, and 3 Ireland is helping to keep the people of Aran connected with the outside world through the National Broadband Scheme (NBS), a government-backed service to provide remote and rural parts of Ireland with affordable broadband services.

Local businesses are now able to make the most of high speed Internet, e-mail and additional services,

giving them much-needed access to local and global markets. At home, residents can use enhanced voice, data and multimedia services to meet all their Internet needs, whether it's downloading music, surfing the Web or booking flights online and making free Skype calls abroad.

The service was officially launched at a ceremony attended by Éamon Ó Cuív, Ireland's Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and Damien Gallagher, 3's NBS Project Director, along with members of the community and local school children.

"I wholeheartedly welcome this major and exciting development for the Aran Islands," said Mr Ó Cuív. "Improving access for the island communities has always been my priority and over the years my department has been to the fore in progressing the physical and social development that is so necessary for the islands' future. The extension of the NBS to the Aran Islands is a huge step forward that will bring enhanced economic and social benefits to these communities."

Cathy Ni Ghoill, Manager of the local co-op and development centre, was thrilled. "We were delighted when the National Broadband Scheme was announced and we feel this is a very important infrastructure for all islands," she said. "This is a necessary part of modern telecommunications infrastructure that places Aran on a par with the rest of the world."

3's Mr Gallagher echoed her comments, saying: "It has never been a more important time for people and businesses on these islands to be connected, as we strive to remain competitive during tough economic times. 3 has played a leading role in driving the delivery of broadband services in Ireland."

Aran is just one of many places which is benefitting from the NBS. In Waterford, in the southeast of the country, the NBS has been welcomed with open arms by the small business community.

"The National Broadband Scheme provided by 3 is a significantly positive step in the right direction in supporting the local economy," said Michael Garland, the Chief Executive Officer of the Waterford Chamber of Commerce. "SMEs (small and medium enterprises) and rural enterprises across Waterford can now target international markets and compete with businesses in urban areas that, up to now, have had a distinct competitive advantage."

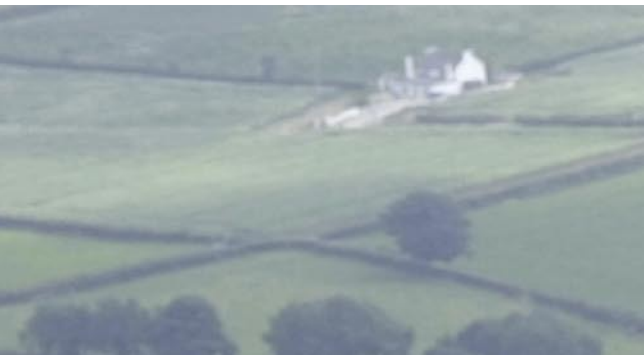
The NBS will eventually supply broadband connections to approximately 223,000 residential, commercial and business addresses in more than 1,000 electoral districts throughout the country. The programme is on schedule to be completed by the end of the year.

Eamon Ryan, Ireland's Minister of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, said: "It is imperative that we have universal broadband coverage in Ireland, for foreign investment, for competitiveness and for our own businesses and householders. Broadband availability will be central to our economic recovery."

3, Ireland's fastest growing telecom network, is fast approaching 500,000 customers in the country, with some 200,000 of them already enjoying the benefits of broadband. 



Above: Minister Ó Cuív (left) with Damien Gallagher at the launch.



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A Journey Back in Time

The three Aran Islands – Inis Mór (Big Island), Inis Meáin (Middle Island) and Inis Óírr (East Island) – are situated at the mouth of Galway Bay. There are about 900 inhabitants on Inis Mór, making it by far the most populated of the islands. The main village, Kilronan, has a harbour that handles most of the tourist trade.

Inis Meáin boasts two forts that date back to the fourth and fifth centuries, while Inis Óírr, the smallest island, features a castle built in 1585 and the ruins of a ninth century church.

The landscape of all three islands is harsh, with steep, rugged cliffs and windswept, rocky fields divided by stone walls. In the past, people made a precarious living from fishing and farming, and that the islands remained inhabited is a tribute to the tenacity and resourcefulness of the inhabitants.

For many visitors, the desolate beauty and remote location of the islands make them an ideal location for quiet contemplation. While tourism has brought more money into the local economy, today's islanders balance membership of the global community with preservation of their unique cultural heritage.