

Be bold.
Be innovative.
Be a digital hub.

A GUIDE TO SETTING
UP AND RUNNING
A RURAL DIGITAL HUB

What is a Digital Hub?

Digital hubs are physical spaces with access to superfast broadband alongside community and business focussed services. They provide digital connectivity, support the development of digital skills and encourage the use of emergent digital technologies.

Digital hubs aim to enhance the local digital environment and can be available to the public, businesses, or local authorities, or a combination.

Digital hubs can target digital awareness, help tackle digital competency gaps or simply provide a much needed superfast broadband connection in rural areas.

In this guide we'll demonstrate why digital hubs are important and how you can design a digital hub that fits the needs of your local area. We will show you:

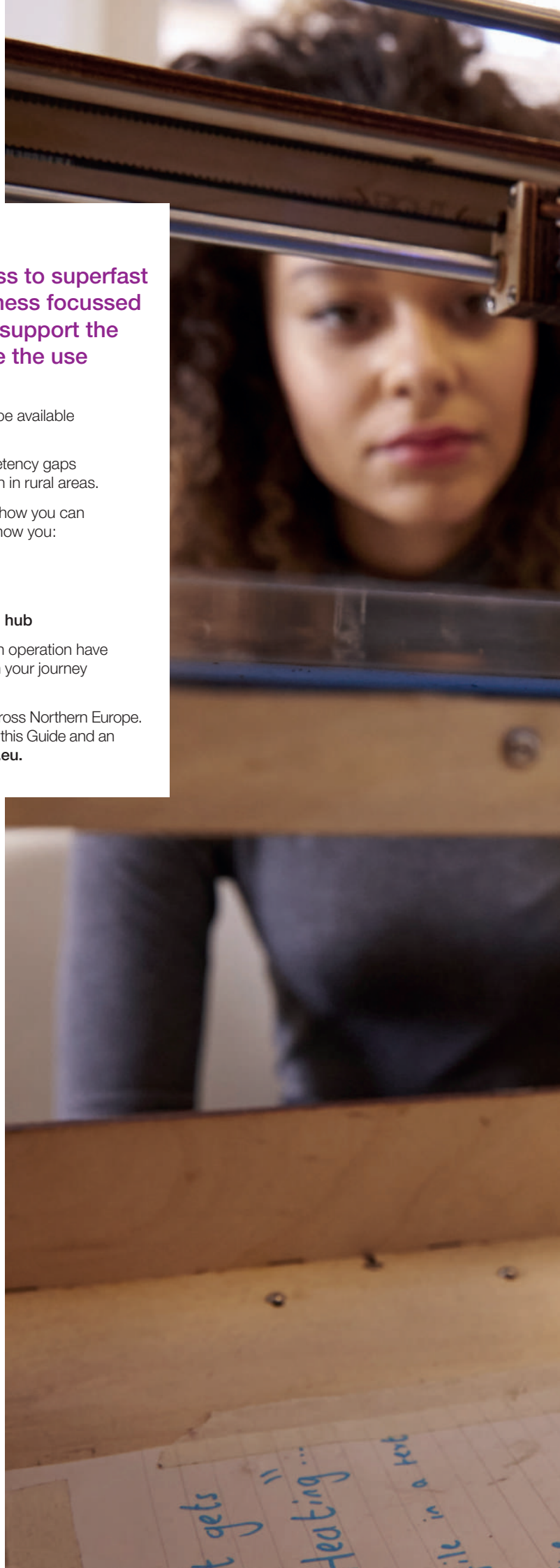
- What a digital hub can do for your community or region
- The types of digital hubs you could develop
- 10 steps to consider when setting up and running a digital hub

Throughout this Guide examples of digital hubs that are currently in operation have been provided, to give you ideas and motivation as you embark on your journey of hub development.

This Guide has been put together following a study of digital hubs across Northern Europe. If you would like further information, including an extended version of this Guide and an e-learning module about digital hubs, please visit www.coraproject.eu.



THEY PROVIDE DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY, SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF DIGITAL SKILLS AND ENCOURAGE THE USE OF EMERGENT DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES"





Why build a Digital Hub in a rural area?

Rural areas have specific challenges, such as a low population density and limited public service provision, that impact how people live and work¹.

Digital technology can respond to these challenges by providing rural residents with new ways of **accessing services**, creating **new opportunities for rural businesses**, improving transport networks, and **fostering stronger social and business networks^{2,3,4}**. However, the ability of rural areas to respond to these opportunities continues to be hampered by relatively poor internet accessibility. The digital divide is still very real for rural areas; across the EU, 13% of homes remain unserved by a fixed broadband network⁵.

Alongside this, the **development of digital skills is also a challenge** in rural areas, yet it is critical to fully exploit digital technology.

Rural businesses, for example, have identified difficulty in accessing appropriate external IT training, difficulty recruiting people with appropriate digital skills, and identified that the existing workforce lacks sufficient digital skills⁶.

The 4th Industrial Revolution offers further opportunities to transform the way people live and work in rural areas, but without the requisite internet connectivity and/or digital skills, there is a continued risk of rural areas being left further behind.

Research⁷ has shown that digital hubs are potential drivers for positive change in rural areas and can be a starting point to overcome these digital divide challenges:

- Hubs can build **collaborative communities that foster both social connectivity and economic change**
- Hubs can **attract diverse members** who can collaborate and exchange knowledge
- Hubs can localise global entrepreneurial culture, and support the diversification of rural economies
- Hubs can **facilitate creativity**, giving individuals and businesses/entrepreneurs the chance to both **learn and engage with digital technology for a range of skill levels**

A key policy goal of the EU Digital Single Market Strategy is that citizens and business can take full advantage of the opportunities that digitalisation can offer⁸. Digital Hubs can help fulfil this goal in rural areas, by ensuring access to digital technology, developing digital skills and improving opportunities for business collaboration and growth⁹.



1 Philip, L., Cottrill, C., Farrington, J., Williams, F., & Ashmore, F. (2017). The digital divide: Patterns, policy and scenarios for connecting the 'final few' in rural communities across Great Britain. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 54, 386–398. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JRURSTUD.2016.12.002>.

2 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2019). Statement of rural research priorities. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rural-research-priorities/statement-of-rural-research-priorities>. (Last accessed 01/10/2019).

3 Price, L., Shutt, J., & Sellick, J. (2018). Supporting rural Small and Medium-sized Enterprises to take up broadband-enabled technology: What works? *Local Economy*, 33, 515–536. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269094218791508>.

4 Jiménez, A., & Zheng, Y. (2018). Information Technology for Development Tech hubs , innovation and development. *Information Technology for Development*, 24(1), 95–118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02681102.2017.1335282>.

5 European Commission (2019). Connectivity: Broadband Market Developments in the EU 2019. Digital Economy and Society Index Report 2019. Retrieved from <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/connectivity> (Last accessed 26/11/2019).

What do Digital Hubs actually do?

Digital hubs can fulfil a range of functions, with the most common features including delivering internet access, providing meeting and networking space, and giving opportunities to test new technologies⁷.

Providing internet access is an integral feature of all rural digital hubs as it underpins the services and support that hubs can provide. Offering meeting spaces provides the opportunity to engage with other businesses, like-minded individuals and/or experts that could provide advice or training.

However, digital hubs can do more than this: they have the potential to improve digital skills for individuals and businesses as well as foster business and community development^{3,6,7,10}.

“We’re able to visit and talk to someone about our business”³

“With digital hubs in areas without good coverage, everybody will be able to access the internet and digital services”⁷

“Businesses can use or visit for better connectivity, start-up workspace, hotdesk space and digital training”⁶

Understanding your local Digital Environment

To develop a digital hub it is crucial to first understand your local digital environment.

This involves assessing the broadband infrastructure, rates of broadband adoption and the digital skills within your region. The skills and development needs of the local community and/or businesses should be considered. Where possible, key target groups should be engaged in the design and development of services delivered by a digital hub.

What are the digital needs of your area?

- What is broadband coverage like across your region? Are all areas covered by superfast broadband? Are there any ‘not spots’?
- Where superfast broadband is available, is the service taken up by local residents and businesses?
- What digital support to rural businesses and communities already exists in your region?
- Are there any groups within the community who are less digitally engaged, or business sectors that show a lower propensity to adopt digital technology?
- What are the dominant or emerging sectors in your region? Are businesses in these sectors able to access the latest digital technology?
- Is your region a good location for digital businesses? Would a digital hub provide the opportunity to foster collaboration or facilitate co-location of the local digital sector?

Sound like a good idea?

We invite you to be bold and innovative. Consider whether a digital hub could help improve the digital environment of your community.

6 Wilson, B., Atterton, J., Hart, J., Spencer, M., & Thomson, S. (2018). Unlocking the digital potential of rural areas across the UK. (March). Retrieved from https://www.sruc.ac.uk/downloads/download/1329/unlocking_the_digital_potential_of_rural_areas_across_the_uk. (Last accessed 18/11/2018).

7 Ashmore, F., and Price, L. (2019) CORA Digital Hub Guide. Retrieved from: <https://coraproject.eu/downloads/>. (Last accessed 01/10/2019).

8 European Commission. (2019). Digital Single Market. Retrieved from: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en>. (Last accessed 21/10/2019).

9 European Commission. (2019). Pan-European network of Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs). Retrieved from: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/digital-innovation-hubs> (Last accessed 26/11/2019).

10 ENRD (European Network for Rural Development). (2017). Rural Businesses: Rural digital hubs. Retrieved from: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/publications/rural-businesses-rural-digital-hubs_en (Last accessed 26/11/2019).

What kind of Digital Hubs are there?

We have identified four of the most common digital hub types that can be found in rural areas.

The types range from digital hubs which simply provide high speed internet access through to those which support sector-specific businesses by offering access to certain technologies. These four types can exist in isolation, but often overlap to offer a unique range of services to businesses and communities to suit a specific area or development priority.

We hope that by summarising digital hubs in this way you will be able to identify which features are most suitable to your rural community or region¹¹.

Public Internet Access Point¹²

- Aim: Provide access to high speed internet
- May also provide ICT training sessions or target a specific group
- Location: Often in public buildings, possibly with other public services, e.g. libraries
- Scale: Local



Incubator / Co-working Space

- Aim: Provide space for meeting, networking and collaborating alongside access to technology
- Often focus on businesses, start-ups and entrepreneurs
- Location: Often located within business centres or co-located with a business
- Scale: Regional



Advice, Training and Support Space

- Aim: Provide businesses and citizens with training, advice and support in ICT
- Often focus on more general digital skill development
- Location: Often in public buildings, but can be co-located with a business or in a business district
- Sometimes run alongside a PIAP
- Scale: Regional



Sector-specific Space

- Aim: Provide access to a specific range of technology that can be experimented with by users, often from a specific sector
- Often includes technology such as 3D printers, scanners, robotics
- Location: Typically within a business or research setting
- Scale: Regional



¹¹ The examples we have used here have not been involved in the making of this Guide. Information about their space and services was taken from their public websites.

¹² As superfast broadband becomes more ubiquitous, PIAPs will cease to exist in isolation, but will be run in conjunction with other digital hub types. However, as rural areas are commonly still 'left behind' with regards to superfast broadband access, they continue to be relevant.

Digital Hub Case Studies



Public Internet Access Point (PIAP)

Vejle Bibliotekerne, Denmark

Vejle Library and regional stakeholders provide digital learning hubs, providing internet access and activities for learning.

<https://www.coraproject.eu>



Incubator/Co-working Space

The Ski Locker, France

The Ski Locker provides a community for remote workers, providing meeting and networking space, delivering fast internet access, fostering community and business development and attracting new businesses/residents/visitors to the area.

<http://www.theskilocker.com/chamonix>



Advice, Training and Support Space

The Rural Hub, Ireland

The Rural Hub specialises in the development of innovative educational materials and digital resources, such as video lectures and interactive workbooks. They use these to address the current and future training needs of rural residents.

www.theruralhub.ie



Sector-specific Space

Lincolnshire Technology Hubs, UK

The Lincolnshire Technology Hubs are three interconnected, but distinct hubs co-located in business or university settings. All three target businesses in Greater Lincolnshire and provide free access to technical support and equipment for prototyping, fabrication and movement analytics.

www.businesslincolnshire.com/explore/funding/search/lincolnshire-technology-hubs/

10 Steps to set up your Digital Hub

The 10 steps below set out the main factors that you will need to consider when developing a digital hub. These can be viewed in any order and at any stage in the process.

1

Source of funding

- Where will your initial funding come from? E.g. private investment, regional development funds, national and/or local public funding, membership fees
- Do you have sufficient funding to cover start-up and running costs including:
 - Office lease or purchase costs for space
 - Staff time to set up, design the services and purchase relevant equipment
 - Branding and marketing to raise awareness of the digital hub and attract users
 - General overheads, maintenance and staff
- Will you implement a fee-based system to fund or subsidise the cost of running the digital hub? Is this a feasible approach for your target audience?
- If you have public grants to support the digital hub, is this available only for a limited period? Have you considered a sustainability strategy to ensure that the digital hub can continue to operate after the funding ends?



2

Strong leadership

- Do you have committed initiators or leaders from organisations such as local government, businesses, citizens groups, or from interested individuals to push the idea forward and see it through to completion?
- Can these committed leaders engage with the target audience to explore demand, and support market research during the set up of the digital hub?
- Can the hub initiator or leader provide a facilitation role to promote the digital hub, and ensure ongoing engagement with target users and sectors?

Strong leadership in C4DI, Hull, UK

A strong leader or facilitator is an important element of any digital hub. John Connolly, the Managing Director of C4DI, an incubator and co-working space in Hull, states that “facilitation is probably the most important role of the hub”. While some digital businesses are good at networking, others benefit from being brought together with others to create more meaningful relationships. These can lead to the development of new ideas, mergers between businesses and collaboration on potential contracts and other project opportunities.



3

Service users

- Who is your target audience? Have you engaged them in the design of the digital hub, and sought their views on potential services?
- Have you conducted market research or feasibility studies to explore the broader demand for services provided by the digital hub?
- Have you ensured that the needs of your users matches the activities you are providing?
- **How will you market the digital hub to service users?** What are the key benefits for them and are there any success stories that you can use?

Engaging users in the design of Give Digital Hub, Vejle, Denmark

Vejle Library Service has established a new digital hub in the rural town of Give, Denmark. The town, of around 4,000 residents, has an aging population structure. The digital hub aims to bring digital technology within reach of all groups in the community, which includes improving the skills and resilience of the town's older population.

In designing the digital hub, the Library Service consulted with local residents and, in particular, a local meet-up of digital experts, to determine how the digital hub should be equipped. The digital hub now features 3D printing technology, photo-editing software, Virtual Reality equipment and raspberry pi's. The library service also runs regular workshops and training courses, to ensure that residents are supported in the use of this technology.

4

Stakeholders

- Who are your relevant **stakeholders** locally, regionally and/or nationally?
- **How will you engage them** and ensure there is strategic leadership?
- What are the benefits of the digital hub to them? E.g. tackling digital competency gaps

5

Scale

- What is the size of the area or region that will be served by the digital hub?
- How big does your digital hub need to be to meet the digital needs of the users in this area? E.g. floorspace, number of rooms
- **In your rural area how many potential users exist within a reasonable distance?**
- What is your potential demand?

6

Space

- Is there a space already available within the community you are serving? E.g. local library, city hall, school or higher education institution, local business, office community
- What additional spin off benefits could co-location provide? E.g. shared staff, increased footfall to local businesses or other community services
- Is the building easy to access for your target audience? Is it close to transport links?
- What type of space would service your target audience? How attractive is it to them?
- Does it need to be a fixed space? If your digital hub is serving a dispersed rural population, could it be mobile?

The Mobile Digital Hub in Syddjurs, Denmark

Syddjurs in eastern Jutland is a sparsely populated area of Denmark. In the face of rural depopulation, the Syddjurs Municipality aims to attract more people to live and businesses to become established in the area. As part of this, the Municipality is prioritising modernising and digitalising government services, with a focus on e-health. The Municipality has established a digital hub, based on a business park, to showcase the technology available for telepresence in dementia care. Alongside this fixed digital hub is a mobile campaign bus which drives around the region to raise awareness of new technologies to a wider number of residents and local businesses in more remote areas.

7

Services

- What technology will you need to provide to achieve your aims?
- Do you already have any physical assets that could be used within your digital hub?
- What services and events will your digital hub offer? E.g. workshops or 1:1 training
- Are there any local services that could be co-located in the digital hub?
- What type of internet connection do you need?
- How will the current infrastructure limit opportunities for your digital hub?

9

Skills

- Is there a skills gap in the rural area you are serving and how could the digital hub help address that?
- Do your staff have the relevant skills to support the digital hub or will they need training?

8

Staff

- How many staff do you need? Will staff be paid staff or volunteers?
 - What will happen if you can't find enough volunteers?
- What kind of staff roles will you need in the digital hub? E.g. technical support, trainers, business advisors, facilitators
- Do your staff have the passion and commitment required to open a digital hub and ensure its sustainability?

'Hubbits' at Horncastle Technology Hub, Lincolnshire, UK

The Horncastle Technology Hub operates within an existing business, Mortons Media, in the market town of Horncastle in rural Lincolnshire. The hub provides access to digitally-enabled technology, such as 3D scanners, printers and CNC milling machines, that can be used by the local manufacturing sector. A distinctive element of the Horncastle Hub is the presence of volunteers – known as “Hubbits” – to staff the hub and provide technical advice to hub users. They are made up of interns from the local university and students participating in the Prince's Trust Scheme. The Hubbits gain valuable work experience by volunteering, while the hub is able to offer a technical advice service for the local business community that does not incur expensive staff costs for its host business.

10

Sustainability

- **How will your digital hub be funded in the future?** E.g. public grants, private investment or fee paying users
 - How will you mitigate risks around future funding?
- **Do you have a marketing strategy** to encourage people to continue to use the digital hub?
- **How can your digital hub attract new residents or businesses** to the area?
- Have you considered future diversification? How will you ensure your digital hub evolves to fit with changing technology and the future needs of your users?



Be bold.
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We would love to hear from you about your digital hub plans!

Please get in touch with us at **fashmore@lincoln.ac.uk** to tell us how you used this Guide or if you wish to have any further information. Specifically, we would love to hear if you are making any plans to build a digital hub, or making changes to existing services or hubs, because of this Guide.

This publication has been produced by the CORA Project, Connecting Remote Areas with digital infrastructure and services. CORA is a collaborative partnership bringing together public authorities, universities and the private sector to identify common challenges to the rural digital divide, exchange experiences and test innovative solutions to create an advanced digital environment in rural areas. The CORA project is co-financed by the European Union European Regional Development Fund in the frame of the Interreg North Sea Region Programme.

For more information, please visit coraproject.eu.

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