

Enhancing Digital Skills in Rural Areas



Why are Digital Skills Important?

The European Commission reports that four out of ten adults lack basic digital skills, and more than 70% of businesses identify a lack of digital skills among their staff as an obstacle to growth¹. These challenges are greater in rural areas where access to broadband internet lags behind urban areas. Lack of digital skills can preclude citizens from access to a range of services, including eGovernment, remote learning, online purchase of goods and services, and the opportunity to fully participate in their communities. Digital skills within the workforce are increasingly important for businesses to access new markets, compete, innovate and increase productivity.

This policy brief includes information on a range of pilots from the COncnecting Remote Areas (CORA) project which examined how municipalities worked with stakeholders and users to overcome these issues and help develop digital skills in remote areas.

Key Messages

- | Use digital hubs to provide spaces for skills development and digital inclusion in rural areas
- | Promote engagement in digital skills initiatives by co-creating services with local groups
- | Ensure trainees are able to contextualise digital training and see the benefits of new technologies



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¹ European Commission (2020). Digital Skills and Jobs. Available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-skills-and-jobs> (Accessed 14/6/2021).

The Magnitude of the Challenge

Limited access to, and use of, broadband internet and digital technologies in rural areas can impede the development of digital skills. Digital skills are increasingly important to businesses and society; the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated their necessity in adapting to new ways of working and interacting for both businesses and communities.

Digital literacy is a key driver of social cohesion and economic prosperity yet, in 2019, the EU reported that only 58% of the population had the most basic digital skills needed to interact online and consume digital goods². This was reflected in the experience of businesses with 70% stating that a lack of digital skills among their workforce was an obstacle to investment and 57% reporting difficulties recruiting ICT specialists². Limited access to broadband internet in some rural areas has only amplified these issues.

Whilst the 4th Industrial Revolution offers opportunities to transform the way people live and work, without the requisite digital skills there is a risk of rural areas being left further behind. The European Commission aims to ensure that 70% of adults have basic digital skills by 2025¹. To achieve this it is vital to identify and share good practice in policies and initiatives to improve digital competencies in

rural areas. This policy brief provides information on a range of solutions developed as part of the CORA Project to help reduce the digital skills gap in rural areas.



Mobile digital hub in Djursland, Denmark (Photo credit: CORA Project)

The CORA Key Messages and Solutions

Key Message 1: Use digital hubs to provide spaces for skills development and digital inclusion in rural areas.

A key policy of the EU Digital Single Market Strategy is that citizens and businesses can take full advantage of the opportunities that digitalisation can offer. Digital hubs can help to fulfil this goal.

Digital hubs are spaces with access to superfast broadband alongside community and business focused services. For rural areas, research shows that they are drivers of positive change, by providing internet connectivity in areas which may otherwise be poorly served, supporting

the development of digital skills and showcasing emergent digital technology. Their presence can broaden access to digital services, support digital inclusion, and improve community cohesion.

Digital Hubs can take a variety of forms, fixed or mobile, as demonstrated by the Digital Bus in Djursland in Denmark. Some focus on the needs of rural communities, providing internet access and accessible digital training. Others support businesses by facilitating co-working, access to sector-specific technologies, or by providing a neutral space to engage in collaboration and knowledge exchange.

² European Commission (2021). Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2020. Available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/desi> (Accessed 14/6/2021).

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



Understanding the potential of digital hubs Lincolnshire, UK

Academics at the University of Lincoln have drawn on the experiences of regional partners in CORA to produce a guide to rural digital hubs. The guide is intended for policymakers and stakeholders seeking to improve digital inclusion in rural areas. Be Bold. Be Innovative. Be a Digital Hub³ identifies 4 specific hub types ranging from those that simply offer high speed internet access to those providing access to training or sector-specific technology. It sets out the 10 steps that policymakers and communities need to consider when setting up a digital hub. The guide is also supported by an online training course <https://coraproject.eu/digital-hubs/>.

Key Message 2: Promote engagement in digital skills initiatives by co-creating services with local groups

Co-creation involves service providers working, on an equal level, with users (residents and businesses) to solve problems and design services. This can range from getting non-users engaged in developing simple digital skills training right through to working with local residents to establish a digital hub. Co-creation with local groups increases the likelihood of users engaging with the service or facility on an ongoing basis, as their needs and expectations have informed the design process.

Co-creating digital hubs with local community groups, Vejle Municipality, Denmark

Vejle Library Service has created two digital learning hubs to improve access to digital technology for residents in rural areas of Vejle Municipality. To identify how the hubs should be equipped and the services on offer, staff conducted a range of workshops and engaged in dialogue with established community groups including a local digital meetup of older residents. Following this, library staff agreed to appoint a number of 'digital trainers' from the local community who would be supported with a programme of digital skills training. The digital hubs now feature a range of technology that includes 3D printing technology, photo-editing software, Virtual Reality equipment and raspberry pi's. By working collaboratively, local residents and community groups have developed a sense of ownership of the digital hubs which has ensured their regular use.

³ Ashmore, F., Price, L. and Deville, J. (2019). Be Bold. Be Innovative. Be a Digital Hub, A CORA Project Re-port. Available at: https://coraproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/CORA_Digital_Hub_Guide_14.01.2020_Executive_Summary.pdf. Retrieved from (Accessed 14/6/2021).

Key Message 3: Ensure trainees are able to contextualise digital training and see the benefits of new technologies.

A challenge for policymakers is to convince citizens to use digital tools when the benefits are not immediately obvious. For individuals to engage with digital technology it is important that they can see the benefits for them. This is particularly the case for those with little experience of using technology, and at risk of 'digital exclusion'. Tailoring content to participants' needs, demonstrating the contribution of technology use to their quality of life, and providing a supportive environment are all important elements of training to support digital skills in rural communities.

**Sharing digital know-how across generations
Torsby Municipality, Sweden & Grue Municipality, Norway**

The Till Dig (For You) and Mer Digital (More Digital) projects aimed to raise the digital competence levels of older people in rural areas of Norway and Sweden. As part of this, a series of workshops were held which paired older citizens with High School students who were able to demonstrate how to access internet applications on laptops, tablets and smart phones. The training focused on applications that would be used on a day-to-day basis, including online banking, booking travel, accessing healthcare, social media and messaging platforms. By working in small groups, the training could proceed at a comfortable pace for participants, and the content made flexible to their needs. Following the workshops, the majority of participants stated that they felt more comfortable about using technology, with 86% keen to attend more training to develop their skills further.

COnnecting Remote Areas (CORA)

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Further CORA Policy Briefs

- | **Digital Infrastructure:** Policy Brief 1 Opening up Opportunities for Cross-border Fibre in Rural Areas
- | **Digital Infrastructure:** Policy Brief 2 Boosting the delivery of digital infrastructure in rural areas
- | **Digital Services:** Policy Brief 4 Developing and delivering digital services in rural areas



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