

Developing and Delivering Digital Services in Rural Areas



Why are Digital Services Important?

The development and delivery of digital services to citizens are vital to the modernisation of public administration and are key drivers of digital inclusion in rural areas. Digital services have a variety of benefits, including increased efficiency, transparency and improving the civic participation of citizens in remote areas. However, digital transformation often remains a challenge for businesses and government authorities. It involves rethinking processes and practices as well as breaking down barriers to adoption for both employees and citizens.

This policy brief presents a range of solutions identified as part of the Connecting Remote Areas (CORA) project. The project has explored how municipalities, stakeholders and users can work together to improve the development and delivery of digital services in remote areas.

Key Messages

- | Ensure the development of digital services is 'citizen driven' to help improve digital take up
- | Ensure staff see the implementation of digital services as a cultural change, not simply the installation of technology
- | Provide citizens with a 'nudge' to start adopting digital services



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The Magnitude of the Challenge

The future of digital public services has huge potential. Across Europe the EU's eGovernment Action Plan aims to modernise public services and make the EU a better place to live, work and invest¹. Digitalisation of public services will lead to efficiency gains for public administrators, and improved access to government services for citizens and businesses. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of digital services to rural communities, prompting a growing reliance on services accessed remotely via digital platforms. Rural areas have long been characterised by limited service provision, with the need to travel longer distances to access education, health and business support. Digital connectivity and engagement offer an opportunity to overcome the disadvantage of distance.

To improve their digital services municipalities must rethink processes and practices as well as break down barriers to adoption for both employees and citizens. Clear strategies must be adopted to promote e-services in order for users to identify the advantages of ICT use. In rural areas these improvements must be considered alongside broadband availability and digital skills levels. This policy brief provides information on a range of solutions developed under the CORA Project to help deliver digital services for all rural citizens.



eGovernment performance by country according to 4 benchmarks² Numbers represent percentage increase in eGovernment performance 2018-2020 (Source European Commission²)

The CORA Key Messages and Solutions

Key Message 1: Ensure the development of digital services is 'citizen driven' to help improve digital take up

Whilst innovative online services are increasingly helping municipalities to meet the needs of their citizens, the provision of these services does not immediately ensure their use. 'Digital take up' (i.e. the use of online services) can be influenced by a number of factors including access to the internet, skills levels, lack of awareness and citizens not recognising the benefit of using the service online. Working in partnership with citizens and businesses to develop digital services can ensure that their development is citizen driven, which can help to maximise digital take up. This approach enables a deeper understanding of need within rural communities to enable residents to take ownership of digital services and ensure resources are directed to areas where they will have the greatest impact.



CORA Project partners testing out the installed outdoor terminal in Germany (Source: Wouter Degadt, Leiedal)

¹ European Commission (2021). eGovernment Action Plan. Available at: [https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/egovernment-action-plan#:~:text=The%20eGovernment%20Action%](https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/egovernment-action-plan#:~:text=The%20eGovernment%20Action%20plan)

² European Commission (2020). eGovernment Benchmark 2020: eGovernment that works for the people. European Commission, Brussels

Installation of remote access screens to access e-Government. Amt Hüttener Berge, Germany.

Amt Hüttener Berge has installed five screens that allow citizens to access its services in four locations across the municipality. Despite the COVID pandemic limiting the use of the screen over 1,000 residents have used them to find out about municipal events and political meetings, contact local administrators or obtain information on local schools, places of interest and leisure activities.

The process of implementing the screens was been 'Citizen Driven', and underpinned by a three stage participation approach to encourage user engagement:

1. **Focus groups:** to involve stakeholders in helping structure a needs-based design for the development of digital services.
2. **Feedback groups:** to engage policymakers and citizen groups in debate around the design and value of the service.
3. **Citizens forums:** to update citizens on the status of the project, receive suggestions and critiques, and amplify media coverage.

Key Message 2: Ensure staff see the implementation of digital services as a cultural change, not simply installation of technology

Many municipalities across Europe have seen an increase in demand for their services, which is challenging in the context of growing funding pressures. Digital services can be seen as a quick fix, with solutions offering the opportunity to maintain services to citizens at a lower cost. However digital should not be viewed as a 'bolt on' to service provision, but as part of a fundamental transformation in how local government services are delivered. There is therefore a need to consider the organisational culture and processes for service delivery, and avoid a narrow focus on digital technology.



Foto: Colourbox

24.10.2018 kl. 11:48

Sophie Løhde: SkærmBesøg kan i nogle tilfælde erstatte fysisk ældrepleje

I en række kommuner kommer hjemmesygeplejersken allerede "på besøg" via en skærm, og som et led i regeringens digitaliseringsreform skal det ske i flere kommuner.

tekst SASCHA REIFFENSTEIN PETERSEN

Improving health service delivery through organisational change, Consultation for tReatment of Dementia (CORD). Syddjurs Kommune, Denmark

Like other municipalities in Europe, Syddjurs has been exploring new ways to maintain a high level of care for an increasing number of elderly citizens. The CORD project aimed to install a videoconferencing solution to reduce travel time for municipality employees to the most rural patients. However, once the system was chosen it became clear that organisational change management was also required to help staff to understand the benefits of digital technology and work with them on how it could be implemented. This institutional change has led to the pilot becoming part of a larger project around videoconferencing for all home healthcare visits within the region. As of July 2021 over a hundred citizens have used the system for a range of services, leading to faster, easier ways of diagnosing changes in patients, better communication between citizens and staff, and fewer resources spent on travel.

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.

KørMed: Providing sustainable mobility solutions in rural areas. Middelfart Kommune Denmark

In response to a growing concern for the environment from local citizens, Middelfart Kommune explored ways to support car sharing in the municipality. While a number of ride sharing apps were already available, there was no coordinated approach to encourage their use. The team from Middelfart developed the KørMed (DriveAlong) project, which identified the need for a change in citizens' behaviour alongside the identification of a preferred IT solution. To support this, KørMed worked closely with three local groups - a large workplace, a sports organisation and an educational institution. In doing so they were able to raise awareness of the app in a targeted way and focus on riding sharing around common driving routes. This way, they were able to nudge and motivate individuals to change their behaviour and drive together. KørMed is subsequently being rolled out across other workplaces in the Municipality.

COncecting Remote Areas (CORA)

The COncecting Remote Areas (CORA) Project is an Interreg funded initiative, which brings together 18 public authorities, universities and private sector organisations to identify common challenges to help improve and empower rural areas through the topics of digital infrastructure, services and skills. The project enables partners to exchange experiences and test innovative solutions to create an advanced digital environment.

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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 Skills:** Policy Brief 3 Enhancing digital skills in rural areas



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