Digital inclusion

People living in rural communities should be able to access digital services and social media via superfast broadband

Speaking up for
rural communities

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IN RURAL ENGLAND

Digital inclusion

Introduction

The Government is committed to its Digital by Default strategy — "digital services that are so straightforward and convenient that all those who can use them will choose to do so whilst those who can't are not excluded." (Cabinet Office, 2013). This presents a problem for people living in rural areas where there is no access to superfast broadband or they do not possess the necessary basic skills to go online.

Overview

Access to superfast broadband is a means to an end. It should enable people to access online services and social media. Having access to the same speed of service is essential if rural dwellers are not to be disadvantaged. This is a very real opportunity for there to be equitable access to services between rural and urban without the need for extra funding to account for the dispersed nature of where people live.

However, it is not just about the speed of internet access or about having access to devices such as laptops or tablet computers — people need to understand the benefits and then they need to know how to use the services.

There are clear benefits to getting online. But the challenge of convincing those hardest to reach of these benefits must not be underestimated. Often, people have access to computers but may have limited knowledge of how to use them, not realising the scope and possibilities. Therefore, raising awareness and demonstrating how they can be used beneficially is key to getting more people engaged and online.

Interventions work best if focused on the context of the individual's life, and is seen as relevant, capturing interest through quick wins. Some individuals are facing a rising cost of living, falling wages or cuts to welfare and benefits. Therefore, focusing digital inclusion on debt, work, food and shelter gains relevance for the disadvantaged and digitally excluded.

Linked to the need to increase digital capabilities is the need to have the infrastructure available for people to use their new skills.

Fast, reliable internet access is essential for homes throughout the country to benefit from online services, and for UK businesses to compete globally.

Some areas of the UK have access to faster broadband speeds than others, with many rural areas receiving far lower speeds than cities and urban areas. Lack of access to broadband can lead to increased social and economic disadvantage and is exacerbated in rural communities by the remoteness from local services.

The ACRE Network supports digital inclusion activities and is helping in the development of superfast broadband by engaging with local partnerships, helping to promote local demand stimulation, digital skills and digital inclusion initiatives.

Raising awareness is is key to getting more people engaged and online

Issue: People need skills to access online services

More services (benefit payments, postal, banking etc.) are being provided electronically via the internet. People require the basic skills to access these services so as not to be disadvantaged

Solution: More support and training for people to access services online

Community mentors — volunteers who are computer literate — are a good way to reach people who want to learn computing within their own community. Mentors help people who do not have the confidence levels to be able to attend a computer course at a local school or college.

In rural areas, basic services (GPs, post offices, shops, day centres, public transport) and social opportunities are limited and declining.

The internet can offer solutions to these problems but an estimated 40,000 people in Shropshire are not online. These people face greater difficulty accessing services or information, a higher cost of doing things offline, loss of social opportunities and a sense of isolation, loneliness or frustration at being out-of-touch with technology.

These problems particularly affect older people because the services and support they rely on are increasingly internet-based. They are missing out on social, financial and health benefits of being online.

Get Shropshire Online is part of ACRE Network member Shropshire Rural Community Council's work to ensure that the move towards a more digital way of providing services does not disadvantage local people who do not have the skills to use the internet.

The project provides:

■ Free one-to-one IT mentoring with a volunteer at several local venues.

■ Access to Learn My Way, a package of short courses created by UK Online Centres to help people develop IT skills.

■ Help for community groups to use digital technology to promote their work and reach more people. This addresses the fact that people are increasingly disadvantaged by not being online.

Issue: Not all communities will benefit from their county broadband provision

The approach and overall investment of public funds to roll out superfast broadband will not cover all areas. Those rural communities that are outside the range will have to secure their own access

Solution: More support for community-focused services

ACRE Network member Norfolk Rural Community Council has developed a next generation wireless internet service, ThinkingWISP, in partnership with AF Affinity and InTouch Systems.

Building on the success of a pilot service, the network is continuing to expand. It offers a fast way to connect to the internet without the speed, cost or service restrictions of traditional solutions. As it is wireless, people can benefit even if their current internet speed is very low because of where they live.

ThinkingWISP connects homes and businesses to fast, reliable broadband through a network of masts and offers a range of broadband packages, with speeds up to 10 Mbit/s.

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Solution: More support for community-focused services

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   The whole system works using radio waves. A transmitter in Norwich, linked to a high-speed fibre optic connection, beams the signal to masts throughout the service area. Transmitters on the masts then broadcast the signal in all directions allowing customers to use small aerials affixed to their property to connect to the internet.

   The signal is encrypted so all data is safe. Unlike copper cables, the signal doesn't degrade within the distances used, providing the same high quality service wherever you are within the service area.

   The partnership stepped in to reconnect a village which was without internet connection for more than four weeks. Some 200 people in Lyng had been unable to access broadband and, although a replacement service was in place, it was so slow that many people could not even open or send an email. ThinkingWISP stepped in and purchased the assets so that it could help to get the villagers back online.

Issue: The benefits of getting online need promoting

People need to be shown all the benefits of getting online but this does require guidance and training by trusted voices in the community

Solution: Provide the right information in the right setting to get people online

Local demand stimulation activity is essential to ensure rural communities and businesses gain maximum benefit from the rollout of superfast broadband or via an alternative technology.

   The experience and skills gained by a number of ACRE Network members through the delivery of digital switchover have formed the basis of best practice, which is shared across our Network.

   Many ACRE Network members have been successful in ensuring that superfast broadband is identified in Community Plans or Neighbourhood Plans.

   ACRE Network member Community Lincs is helping to prepare Lincolnshire for superfast broadband by developing a network of broadband champions who are prepared to help their communities by volunteering some time to assist with skills development.

   A network of more than 40 broadband champions has been established, with a supporting website.

   Most of the work with the champions has been awareness raising and encouraging registrations at Onlincolnshire which is the home of the County Broadband Plan.

   The project is now moving towards demand stimulation — encouraging people to use the internet and providing help with digital skills.

   Community Lincs also hosts training on behalf of Sleaford Job Centre, which is designed to help those with very few IT skills or prospects of gaining them elsewhere. Learner Patricia Gould, pictured, said of the course: "It's been really good; I didn't know anything about computers before this course — now I am looking for work online."