DIGITAL HUBS: ENSURING BUY IN AND ENGAGEMENT

Digital Hubs offer a key tool for providing access to digital technology and supporting digital skills development in rural areas. They can offer co-working space, opportunities for networking and collaboration and the chance to trial new technology, however research shows that they often struggle to attract and retain users. Researchers at the University of Lincoln spoke to the managers of rural digital hubs across Europe to find out how their hubs had evolved - from assessing the initial demand to becoming financially sustainable.

University of Lincoln research has:

→ Identified a number of ways in which policy makers could help those running digital hubs to ensure they are future proof and sustainable based on the experiences of successful hubs across Europe.

→ Used the lessons learnt from interviews with hub managers to produce an online learning guide available at www.ruraldigital.eu.

→ Provided support and advice for District Councils looking to set up digital hubs within their regions.

Rural areas have low population density, high rates of home workers and limited service provision which all impact on how people live and work. Digital technology can help respond to these challenges by providing rural residents with new ways of accessing services, creating new opportunities for rural businesses and fostering stronger social and business networks. However, the ability of rural areas to respond to these opportunities continues to be hampered by the urban-rural 'digital divide'. In the UK 12% of rural homes do not yet have access to superfast broadband and it was recently estimated that 11 million people within the UK (21%) were without the digital skills needed for everyday life[2].

Recent work by Price and Deville, at the University of Lincoln, outlined how to set up and run a digital hub

to improve access to, and use of, internet-enabled technology in rural areas and tackle digital competency gaps. Their guide - *Be Bold, Be Innovative, Be a Digital Hub: A Guide to Setting up and Running a Digital Hub*[3] - has been used by policy makers setting up digital hubs in both the UK and Europe. This research aims to fill knowledge gaps around funding, engaging users and ensuring a mix of services, to help policy makers ensure their digital hubs are future proof and sustainable.

[1] Ofcom (2020) *Connected Nations 2020 UK report*. UK: Ofcom.

[2] Lloyds Bank (2021a) *Essential Digital Skills Report 2021*. London: Lloyds Bank.

[3] https://eprints.lincoln.ac.uk/id/eprint/41175/1/CORA_Digital_Hub_Guide_14.01.2020_Executive_Summary%20%281%29.pdf

WHAT DID THE UNIVERSITY DO?

The University of Lincoln team carried out interviews with managers from 10 rural digital hubs in UK, Ireland, Netherlands, Denmark and Belgium. These hubs ranged from co-working spaces simply offering desk or office space to high tech Fablabs based within academic institutions. Interviews covered how hubs obtained their start up funding, how they generated and retained users as well as how they had become financially sustainable.

WHAT DID HUB MANAGERS TELL US?

Despite the 10 hubs all being very different there were a number of key messages:

Choose a committed leader with the right team: A committed and passionate leader is vital to advocate for the hub. Links to community leaders can also help raise the profile. Having skilled staff in place is a key requisite, even more than technical equipment!

Choose the right location: A prominent location at the heart of its community can raise the profile of the hub and help foster engagement. Co-location with other services can help ensure regular footfall, increase awareness or support financial sustainability.

"We actually placed the hub close to the library and at this public culture house. So there was already a known location and people.... And you know, we could just add to the local offerings."

Grow the hub alongside its users: Starting small can help a hub grow alongside its members - buying lots of high spec kit may result in under-utilised space and redundant equipment.

"Going back to the start now, I wouldn't have bought all that other equipment. I kind of felt that we had to buy it almost to validate ourselves"

Build a sense of community: Communal space with good coffee and opportunities for networking helps a community to develop.

"You come to these places a lot of the time for that community element and if you've not got that it takes a lot to sell"

Be persistent at marketing and promotion: Choosing the right name, using multiple media to advertise services and targeting transient users, as well as local residents and businesses, can all help build a customer base.

Consider membership and subscription packages: As well as supporting income generation these can assist with promoting user engagement.

IMPACT ON POLICY

This research with hub managers has created an evidence base which can be used to develop support and help for policy makers wishing to open rural digital hubs in their area. To date the team have:

- Shared findings with policy makers in a number of local authorities looking at setting up digital hubs. The findings from this work have enabled the researchers to guide them to find out what will work best in their locality and how they may fund the provision.

- Worked with the government's Open Innovation Team to identify All Party Parliamentary Groups and key individuals within central government who may be interested in this work, in particular around the 'levelling up' agenda.