

Doing Digital Inclusion: Rural Handbook

With people living in rural areas facing very specific barriers to getting online and gaining basic digital skills, this handbook outlines some common challenges and offers tips and resources for tackling rural digital exclusion.

Key stats:

9.5 million UK adults lack basic digital skills¹ and 5.9m of those have never been online². The areas with the highest rates of internet non-users are rural ones - with Northern Ireland heading up the pack, followed by Highlands and Islands, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, West Wales and the Valleys and Lincolnshire³.

- Only **80%** of rural households in the UK have standard broadband availability compared to **98%** of urban households.
- Only **21%** of rural households in the UK have superfast broadband availability compared to **86%** of urban households.⁴
- On average people living in the most rural areas travelled **45%** further per year than those in England as a whole and **53%** further than those living in urban areas.⁵
- In 2009 **42%** of households in the most rural areas had a regular bus service close by compared to **96%** of urban households.⁵

These statistics, which highlight the lower levels of internet usage, access and broadband availability in rural areas, confirm rurality as a major contributing factor to digital exclusion.

1. BBC, Media Literacy: Understanding Digital Capabilities follow-up, September 2013 and March 2014, p6.
2. ONS, Internet Users 2015, p36.
3. ONS, Internet Users 2015, Reference tables 4a & 4b.
4. Ofcom, The availability of communications services in the UK, May 2013, p 26-27.
5. Government Statistical Service, Statistical Digest of Rural England 2012, February 2012, p. 65.

Barriers to Learning

Emerging themes from Tinder Foundation's 2014 Rural Action Research Project:

Motivation and skills:

- An older-than-average population in rural areas is more likely to actively resist the internet and/or have mobility and dexterity issues, making it difficult for them to use technology and seek support.
- Rural communities suffer from ongoing out-migration of young people with digital skills, so peer-to-peer and family support are less likely.
- Smaller rural areas will have fewer local opportunities for digital skills training, and having to travel greater distances to attend support can reduce the motivation to learn.
- There can be a lack of awareness of which courses would best meet local needs, particularly where populations are scattered.

Access:

- Rural areas are often last to have newer, faster technologies such as broadband and fibre.
- Due to poor or non-existent transport and longer distances to delivery venues, it can be more difficult and expensive to access computer classes or outreach venues.
- With places such as libraries often having shorter opening hours in rural areas, access to publicly available computers is limited. This can make learning slow - learners forget what they have learned and do not consolidate their skills, especially if they rely on weekly outreach sessions in locations where there isn't regular access to computers or the internet.
- Additional challenges associated with disability, older age and low income are compounded in rural areas. Hard-to-reach groups living in rural areas are more likely to suffer from increased social isolation.

Delivery Challenges

Motivation and skills:

- The normal supporting role played by volunteers is more complicated and expensive in rural areas as they are more likely to be expected to:
 - Use their own cars
 - Transport kit between venues
 - Deal with technical issues
 - Operate in learners' homes
- Standard digital awareness-raising strategies are less effective in rural areas due to the independent nature of the population and less footfall past community venues.
- Increased reliance on volunteers means that organisations have to invest more time and resource into volunteer management and training to ensure individuals have the necessary digital skills.
- With fewer organisations delivering digital inclusion in rural areas, digital advocacy can be more dependent on certain individuals flying the flag for digital skills training in their area. There can be less chance for exchange of best practice with other deliverers, as training and networking events often take place in urban areas.

Access:

- Delivery for centres in rural areas can be expensive due to travel costs and expenses incurred by staff and volunteers.
- Broadband connectivity and mobile internet access can be poor or even non-existent. Poor connectivity hampers outreach sessions, and has the potential to discourage centres from delivering outreach to the most excluded.
- Scattered populations and inaccessible venues mean classes tend to be small. This allows for more one-to-one time, but increases the cost-per-head of delivery.

Look up Alston Moor's CyberMoor project:
[How one small community moved quickly to overcome connectivity problems](#)

Rural Digital Inclusion Toolkit

The Rural Digital Inclusion Toolkit at www.ukonlinecentres.com/rural has plenty of case studies, research links, and resources to help you tackle digital exclusion in rural areas.

Here are some tips to help you get started:

How To Engage and Recruit Learners

1. Label it carefully

Calling your session a 'computer class' may limit the number of people who get involved. Instead, think about the interests and hobbies of the people you're trying to reach and base your activity around ways of engaging with these interests online. For example, keeping in touch with family and friends, saving money or skills for business all appeal to a wide audience and can attract new people, eager to learn.

2. Work in partnership

Work with existing groups like Rotary Clubs and Women's Institutes to hold events to build awareness of your regular classes. Approach community leaders and organisers to help promote your activities locally.

3. Go to where your audience already is

People will already be gathering as part of informal groups - find out where they are and go to them. Try coffee mornings, family history classes, craft groups, lunch clubs and carers' groups.

4. Use word of mouth

Once you've got some regular learners, consider a 'refer a friend' campaign. Existing learners are your best advocates and can spread the word about the support you're providing.

5. Target specialist groups

Some rural working populations have very specific needs (e.g. farmers needing to interact with the Rural Payments Agency). Take some time to understand their individual needs, outline the benefits the internet can bring to them, and tailor your support to that specialist group.

6. Engage the whole community

Rural communities are often tight knit, and offline social engagement can already be strong. Harness this enthusiasm by using hyperlocal websites or Facebook pages in your sessions. You could offer to set these up for people if they don't already exist, or show learners how they can make the most of existing online communities.

Things to Consider Before You Deliver

1. Find a logistically practical venue with good connectivity

Libraries can often provide connected computers and a familiar public space, with good transport links.

Schools may have underused IT facilities, with Wi-fi and access to kit. They also offer the potential to attract new learners and volunteers.

One UK online centre in N. Yorkshire delivers weekly sessions at a Wetherspoons pub where they have access to free Wi-Fi if the group buys hot drinks.

Align your work with **Social Housing Providers'** digital inclusion teams. Offer free digital skills training to tenants and staff in return for access to communal rooms with broadband, or offer to bring your own Wi-Fi hotspots.

Members of small communities may work in nearby larger communities. Consider setting up delivery near where people work but tailor your sessions to the smaller community for a sense of identity and mutual support.

2. Seek out partners

Local Action Groups and **The Association for Town and City Management** can be useful, particularly around issues of funding, investment and local policies. Have a look at the Rural Development Programme for England for more information.

Get in touch with **Local Authority teams** dedicated to supporting rural populations or specific types of worker, such as farmers, to understand local digital skill gaps and where you could potentially offer support.

Contact your local **ACRE Network Rural Community Council**. The network supports digital inclusion activities and is keen to engage with local partnerships.

Contact your local **Jobcentre Plus** to find out if you can help rural jobseekers access online employability services including Universal Jobmatch. Always check if funding is available to help.

3. Use kit wisely

Where broadband connectivity is lacking, take mobile connectivity equipment like dongles and Wi-Fi hotspots (sometimes called MiFis) to outreach venues. Remember to check network coverage using the USwitch broadband postcode checker first.

One centre in rural Cleveland also lends out dongles and mobile Wi-Fi to learners to use at home, so they can test kit and check network access before buying their own device.

Loan kit to learners so they can practice and develop skills between sessions. Centres in Tinder Foundation's Home Access pilot found allowing learners to use a device in their own home to be extremely valuable for improving their skills.

4. Manage your volunteers

Engaging with the most isolated individuals requires sustained one-to-one support, so volunteers may be the most cost-effective option.

Think about creating a super-volunteer role: Northumberland Community Development Network split a large geographic area into three smaller areas, each overseen by a lead volunteer responsible for recruitment, matching and supporting delivery volunteers.

Build up a network of volunteers, but remember that careful management and support is required to deal with the additional responsibilities that comes with a larger workforce. Do consider safeguarding, specialist training, and DBS checks.

5. Be supportive

Build up people's trust and confidence in what you have to offer. Deliver in small groups and add the personal touch to your sessions for long-term success.



Tinder Foundation supports rural digital inclusion through our Rural Specialist Network. See www.ukonlinecentres.com/rural for more information about our commitment to digital inclusion delivery and to find out how you can join the network.