



CoP Public Infrastructure and Social Services

Example of Good Practice

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Village halls as digital hubs

Living Lab Mid Wales

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1. Introduction

A project in the Welsh county of Monmouthshire has equipped village halls with superfast broadband to tackle the rural-urban digital divide, and connect community spaces with new possibilities.

In the UK, the rural-urban divide in digital connectivity has been described as 'two speed Britain' (Farrington et al. 2015). Alongside divides in broadband provision and access, rural 'notspots'¹ leave gaps in mobile coverage. As services from health to banking go digital, tackling the two speed-challenge is critical. But,



Llanfair Kilgeddin village hall, Monmouthshire. Photo © Jaggery (cc-by-sa/2.0)

expanding broadband and mobile coverage would take considerable investment in

¹ 'Notspots', describing a lack of service, is used as a term in UK rural development literature to contrast with 'hotspots', where services are readily available (E.g. Skerratt 2010).

infrastructure, which is uneconomic for private providers and far beyond local government budgets. Rural internet hubs, where local people can access high speed connections, offer smaller scale solutions (e.g. Ashmore et al. 2019, ENRD 2017). Monmouthshire’s project realised the hub idea using a community resource many rural places already have – a village hall. The project demonstrates how targeted investment in digital infrastructure can help **connect communities, re-purpose rural spaces**, and create new ways to **bring people together**.

2. Project Intention / Background information

Monmouthshire (pop 94,000) is a rural county, with five main towns (each of fewer than 15,000 people) and many small villages. Although the county is within commuting distance of Cardiff, the Welsh capital city, Monmouthshire shares many challenges with more remote rural regions, including poor digital connectivity. In Wales, while 93% of urban premises have access to superfast broadband, this falls to 77% in rural areas, and only 41% of rural premises have good 4G mobile coverage (Miller & Greenwood 2019).



Monmouthshire, Wales © OpenStreetMap Contributors

The Monmouthshire village halls project was a trial initiated through the rural development and digital inclusion work of the County Council and a local community council. The project aimed to:

- Improve broadband provision in the local area;
- Raise digital awareness and expand local residents’ digital skills;
- Engage with local communities;
- Improve the viability of the village halls;
- Attract new users to the village halls.

The project focussed on four village halls within the Llanover (pop. 1,392) area of the county: Llanover, Llandewi Rhydderch, Llanfair Kilgeddin, and The Bryn. It was financed through funding from the Welsh Government’s Rural Community Development Fund (RCDF) and the EU-funded Rural Development Programme (RDP).

3. Main Description

The pilot project with four halls began in late 2018 and runs through to September 2020. To date, all four village halls have been upgraded for accessibility and had superfast broadband connections and Wi-Fi equipment installed. The village hall connections are available for the

local community to access, and to facilitate events and activities at the halls. The halls are open to the local community through a range of timetabled events and activities. They are also available to hire at affordable hourly rates for other public, private and commercial uses. (Demographic data on users is not collected.)

One of the project's first obstacles was that the connectivity challenges that create the need for rural digital hubs also affected how the halls themselves could be hooked up to superfast broadband. Due to their locations, different halls needed different technical solutions. Some of the learning from taking on this technical challenge is also being applied now that Monmouthshire is taking part in a UK government supported 5G rural testbed programme.

While the core of the project is to equip village halls with superfast broadband, the potential impact is far broader. The halls are now hosting an activity and training programme to help local residents learn more about digital technology. This programme is coordinated by the project steering group, and has included trainers from Monmouthshire County Council. The halls have also been fitted with High Definition projectors, screens and surround sound systems, allowing for events like film screenings or music broadcasts. There is even the possibility of a live event held in one hall being simulcast into the others. These changes open up the halls to new audiences and all age groups, creating a community space that brings people together, just as it gets them online. While it is too early to track the wider effects of the project for the locality, existing research from projects elsewhere does show that community spaces have an important role in enhancing social capital (e.g. Svendsen 2010).

The upgraded halls are already being used to re-connect residents with local democracy. Community council meetings are held in the halls, and the connected technology allows residents to join the meeting via Skype and directly engage with their councillors without needing to drive.

Each village hall has its own voluntary management committee (pre-dating the project), which is responsible for day-to-day operations and programming events. Proceeds from hall hire, bar sales and other fundraising events contribute to the operational and maintenance budget. The project itself is run as a partnership between these committees, the Llanover community council, and Monmouthshire County Council. There is a project steering group which meets quarterly. Although the project will conclude in September 2020, the four village hall committees and the local community council will continue to support the implementation. The evaluation at the end of the project will also be used to inform Monmouthshire County Council's continuing work on rural digital infrastructure.

4. References

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