



CoP Public Infrastructure and Social Services

Short Reports

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Rural Service Hubs

Mid Wales, Metropolitan Area of Styria, Helsinki-Uusimaa region,
Valencia, Tukums

Key words: Public services, service access, service provision, co-location

1. Introduction

Many rural areas struggle to support local services, from shops and banks to public offices. Service hubs – where **multiple services are co-located in the same space** – can offer solutions.

Cities benefit from agglomeration: there are shops and the people to shop in them; services and the people to use them. But, in many rural locales, shops struggle to stay open and services are centralised further afield. The growth of urban services against declining rural access and provision is problematic. The ROBUST project believes that inclusive and sustainable growth in Europe requires mutually beneficial rural-urban relationships. However, just as it is not inclusive to locate services solely in urban centres, it is often not financially sustainable to replicate services across widespread rural areas.

Service hubs can offer **alternative models for providing rural services** and strengthening rural-urban cohesion and connectivity. This report:

- Describes the **challenges of rural service provision and access** (p. 3-5), and explores **how service hubs can address these challenges** (p. 6-7).
- Presents shared learning from the ROBUST project, through **9 case studies from 5 countries**: Austria, Finland, Latvia, Spain and Wales (p.8-17).
- Distils key concepts into a **planning guide for service hubs** (p.18-19).



2. Summary and key lessons

Services help people to do things. What EU policy terms ‘essential services’ and ‘services of general interest’ include transport, finance, digital communications and healthcare. In rural development research, facilities like local shops and village halls are often included, too. In policy and practice, service provision is about **getting services to people**; and, service access is about **getting people to services**. Balancing both provision and access is crucial.

Unfortunately, there are many disparities in services between urban and rural areas. **Rural areas pose particular challenges for service provision and access**, including:

- Higher costs due to distance and without economies of scale.
- Small populations resulting in less demand and little commercial viability.
- Dispersed populations for whom distant services are difficult to access.
- Inadequate transport and digital infrastructures.
- Changing demographics, especially ageing populations and seasonal residents.

Although rural and urban areas need the *same* services, they need **different solutions** for getting services to people and people to services. **Service hub models** can offer solutions to rural provision and access challenges.

A hub **co-locates multiple services in a single, central space** with associated infrastructure. Hubs **target investment** to tackle provision challenges, and **connect services** to address access needs. Three principles from ROBUST can be practically applied to rural service hubs:

- Hubs should be located at the core of a **locality** that makes sense for users, not maps.
- Hubs need to be organised through **network governance**, combining local participation and partnerships across scales and sectors.
- Hubs can be designed to support **smart development** priorities, and to enhance business opportunities and economic inclusion.

Lessons for rural service hubs – from nine ROBUST case studies

- Innovative hubs **link existing services** and infrastructures in **new ways**.
- **Synergies** and **efficiencies** can be created by combining different services and expertise.
- New hub developments need **expert knowledge, support** and **project funding**.
- Hubs are best developed in **convenient locations** where people are likely to use them.
- Local users need to **participate in decisions** about their **service access needs**.
- Hub projects do not need to be large-scale – **small ambitions** can have **large local impacts**.
- Effective hubs require **cooperation** between many organisations and providers.
- Governments can foster hub development through **funding** and **project management**.
- Unless fully government-supported, hubs need a **sustainable business model**.
- Workers, commuters, seasonal residents and tourists can be **target groups** for hubs, too.

3. Background: Providing and accessing services – the rural challenge

3.1. What is a service?

A service is simply defined as “something that helps someone to do something” (Downe 2020: 20). Services can be public, private, community or non-profit. ‘**Essential services**’ cover things that all people need to access for full inclusion in society; in the *European Pillar of Social Rights* (2017) these include water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications. These services – along with others, like healthcare and postal services – are also described in EU policy as ‘**services of general interest**’.

There is no formal, Europe-wide list of what is included as an essential service or a service of general interest (Fassmann et al. 2015). This is simply because different countries and regions have different policies regarding the sorts of services their citizens should be able to access, for a variety of reasons. Individuals and communities can also have their own ideas about the services that matter most to them, and make their localities liveable. Rural development research often includes as services facilities like shops, village halls and even pubs, which play important social and symbolic roles (e.g. Skerratt & Hall 2011, White et al. 2007).

3.2. The difference between service provision and access

Providing services and *accessing* services are clearly connected, but it is also important to understand how they are distinct. **Service provision** is about **getting services to people**. There are four basic questions for planning service provision (Downe 2020: 61):

- **What** does the service do?
- **How** does the service work?
- **Who** is the service for?
- **Why** does the service exist?

Service access is about **getting people to services**. Research in the health sector has identified five key components to access (Penchansky & Thomas 1981):

- **Availability** – are the services people need available?
- **Accessibility** – can users physically reach the services they need?
- **Accommodation** – are the services organised to meet users’ needs?
- **Affordability** – can people afford to use the service?
- **Acceptability** – what do users think of the service?

Providing services, and ensuring those services are accessible to those who need them, are parts of a puzzle that can present separate challenges – but one cannot exist without the other. Gaps between provision and access are a major source of challenges for services.

3.3. Services and rural-urban connections

People need services wherever they live – and services are vital for making it possible to live in particular places. Service provision and access are integral to regional administration, planning and policy. The European Commission (2004: s.3.3) has further stated that:

“The access of all citizens and enterprises to affordable, high-quality services of general interest ... is essential for the promotion of social and territorial cohesion in the European Union”.

Unfortunately, there are many disparities in service provision and access between and within regions. Rural and urban differences are a significant factor here. Research from the OECD (2010: 16) demonstrates that “It is possible to identify systematic differences in services, availability and quality, between urban and rural territories.”

Many rural areas have lost services as provision has tended to shift up the urban hierarchy over time (White et al. 2007), concentrating services in geographic and demographic centres (Noguera Tur & Ferrandis Martínez 2014). Privatisation since the 1980s (Furuseth 1998) and austerity in the last decade (e.g. Milbourne 2015) has hastened these processes. Centralising services in urban areas can create a vicious circle (Fig. 1) leading to even fewer services in future (OECD 2006). Inadequate services also exacerbate rural poverty and deprivation (Furuseth 1998, Williams & Doyle 2016) and create feelings of isolation (Skerratt 2018). This is not a sustainable situation for rural communities in the long-term (OECD 2006, House of Lords 2019). Tackling rural-urban inequalities in services is crucial for inclusive development across Europe’s regions.

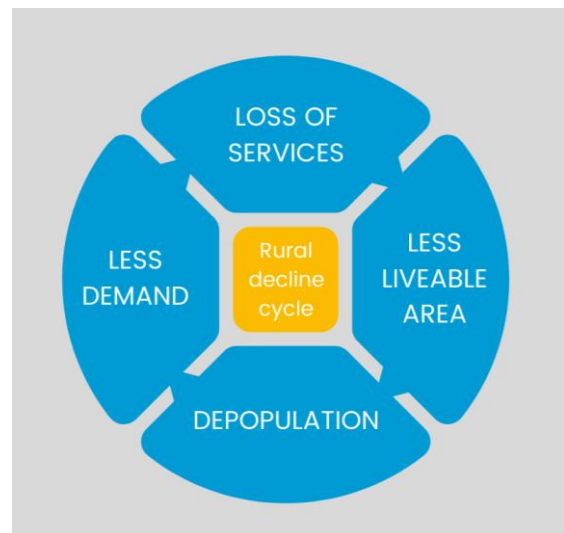


Figure 1 The cycle of rural decline following service loss

3.4. What are the challenges for rural services?

Delivering services is always complex and challenging. Rural areas pose particular challenges for both providing and accessing services. These long-standing challenges include:

- Rural services typically **cost more to provide and access**, due to the lack of economies of scale, and longer travel and transport distances (OECD 2010).
- Rural areas often have a **lower tax base** for publicly funded services (OECD 2006).
- Small and dispersed rural populations mean **less demand** for services (OECD 2010). This can lead to market failure, when services are not commercially viable.
- **Long distances** in dispersed rural areas make services harder to access (OECD 2010), and people less likely to use them (White et al. 2007).
- Providing and accessing some services depends on **infrastructures** that may be **inadequate or unavailable** in rural areas (House of Lords 2019).

- **Ageing rural demographics** bring additional service and access needs (OECD 2010).
- Multilocality, through second home ownership and seasonal migration to rural areas, produces **different service demand patterns** (Lehtonen et al. 2019, Slätmo et al. 2019).

These challenges mean that it is often not possible to deliver services rurally in the same mode and manner as in urban areas. Though rural and urban both need the same services, they need different solutions to get services to people, and people to the services.

Strategies for rural service provision generally fall into three types (Furuseth 1998: 237):

- **Consolidation** – brings multiple services together in a single location.
- **Segmentation** – splits services among different user and provider groups.
- **Mobility** – provides services on a mobile basis.

This report focuses on consolidation, specifically through rural service hub models.



Cletwr Community Shop, Tre'r Ddol, Mid Wales. © Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins.

4. Service hubs as a rural provision and access solution

4.1. What is a service hub?

A service hub is the **co-location of multiple services in a single space**. Figure 2 summarises the key features of a typical hub.

Hub-type models are also variously described in the research literature as ‘multi-purpose village centres’ (Adams 1981), ‘multi-service outlets’ (Moseley et al. 2004), ‘multi-functional centres’ (Svendsen 2010), and particularly in terms of government services as ‘one stop shops’ (OECD 2006).

Of course, hubs are not a new idea. In the UK, the idea of a ‘multi-purpose village centre’ was first advocated by the Development Commission in 1981. Hub models have now been proposed within rural development for almost two decades (e.g. Berry 2004, Moseley et al. 2004), mirroring trends towards consolidation and integration in the public sector (e.g. Kubiciel & Hagen 2001).

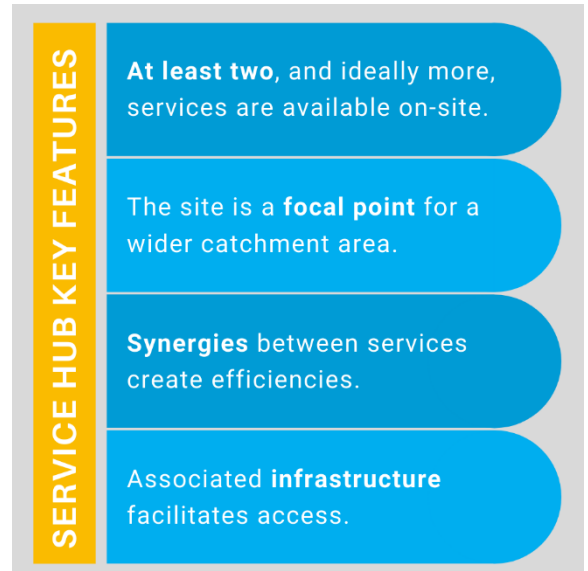


Figure 2 Key features of a service hub

4.2. What are the benefits of service hubs for rural areas?

Service hubs are forms of social innovation, which reconfigure “social practices, in response to societal challenges” (SIMRA 2017:6). The specific benefits of a hub will differ for individual rural localities, based on their challenges and needs, how the hub has been designed, and which services are provided. Previous research has identified several general benefits:

- **Reduced costs** for operation and transport (Moran et al. 2007).
- **Reduced distance** that people need to travel to access otherwise disparate services (Moran et al. 2007, Moseley et al. 2004).
- **Convenience** (Moseley et al. 2004).
- **More users**, both in numbers and range (Moseley et al. 2004).
- Providing a **meeting place** and **community focus** (Moran et al. 2007) that enhances social capital (Svendsen 2010).
- Fostering **synergy**, **shared learning** and **innovation** between co-located services (Memon & Kinder 2017, Moseley et al. 2004).

Some potential benefits may be more targeted. For example, in the case studies below, Allerleierei (Case Study 1) used synergies between services to foster a local circular economy, while REGIOTim (Case Study 8) encourages sustainable transport use.

4.3. How do service hubs work?

Service hubs bring together a range of services, which may or may not be related and can be integrated in different ways. The *relationships between* co-located services can be distinguished from the ways in which the services are *integrated*. **Relatedness** concerns **which services** share a space, and whether they are similar or different:

- **Related** services are very similar, for example a food shop and café.
- **Complementary** services differ but are interlinked, for example a shop and ATM.
- **Diverse** services are not directly related, for example a food shop and post office.

Integration concerns **how services** share the space, and whether they share the same space at the same time (Berry 2004):

- **Serial** co-location uses the same space for different services at different times.
- **Parallel** co-location uses different spaces within the same location at the same time.
- **Integrated** co-location brings services together in ways that make sense for users.

Together, relatedness and integration shape the synergies between services, and affect the facilities required and the users attracted. Each individual hub's combination of relatedness and integration depends on how the hub is designed, and the provision and access needs that the hub addresses. There is no single, optimum model. However, different combinations of relatedness and integration may create different opportunities and challenges.

The following pages present a range of case studies from rural service hubs in action.



REGIOtim multimodal mobility hub in Hart bei Graz, Austria © Regionalmanagement SZR

Case study 1: Developing the circular economy through a farmers' shop in rural Austria

Laßnitzhöhe is a small municipality about 20km east of Graz. For many years, a local farmers' market served residents. When a new main square was planned in 2015-16, the goal was to integrate the market into the development in order to increase the attractiveness of the area for residents and visitors. 'Allerleierei' – a new type of farm shop – was the result.

The word 'Allerleierei' means that many things can be bought. The hybrid shop and café sells locally produced food products, along with fresh-cooked meals, coffee and deli food. Allerleierei's **aims as a hub** are to:

- **Provide a market** for local farmers and producers, **reducing transport costs**;
- Supply **residents and visitors** with fresh, high quality local food;
- Create a **social meeting point** in the centre of the municipality;
- Promote a sustainable, **circular local economy**.

Allerleierei is run as a business in partnership between a hotelier, a restaurant owner, and an organic vegetable farmer. Organisation follows a model of 'Land & Wirt' – countryside and host – which links rural products with host services. The partners share operational responsibilities and divide tasks according to their skills and resources. By combining knowledge, they are also able to implement innovative ambitions such as zero waste targets. The initial development was enabled by the partners' own investments, and supported by grants from the area's LEADER Local Action Group and EU regional funding.

In recent years, the population in Laßnitzhöhe has grown substantially, with many residents commuting to work in Graz. Proximity to the city also attracts visitors, especially at weekends. Allerleierei responds to these users' needs through extended opening hours after work and during the weekend. In this way, urban proximity can be used to sustain rural services.

Allerleierei offers several **lessons for rural hubs**, including:

- Hub models which engage local producers and suppliers can help **retain economic value** within the region.
- As well as reducing costs, co-located services can **reduce resource use** and waste.
- **Combining skills** from different fields of expertise create new synergies and innovations.
- Commuters and seasonal visitors are also important customers; facilitating access for these different groups can further **revenue** to support the hub.
- Funding applications can be daunting for local entrepreneurs – **knowledge bases**, such as local LEADER groups, can provide crucial **development support**.

Sources: Federal Institute of Agricultural Economics, Rural and Mountain Research & Regional Management of the Metropolitan Area of Styria



*Fresh food selections inside Allerleierei
© RMSZR & BAB*

Case study 2: Creating a community-owned café, shop and social hub in rural Wales

Tre'r Ddôl is a small village in the predominantly rural Welsh county of Ceredigion. In 2009, the village garage – which also served as a shop – closed. The nearest shop was several kilometres away. In response, a group of residents decided to re-open the garage as a not-for-profit community-owned enterprise. 'Cletwr' shop and café opened in 2013. Following successful funding bids, the original garage was replaced by a purpose-designed and environmentally sustainable building in 2017.



Inside the shop area at Cletwr
© Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins

Alongside offering shopping, eating, and a place to meet, Cletwr provides important local services including a free WiFi hub, cash withdrawal, an oil buying syndicate, parcel drop-off point, mobile library visits, police and government advice sessions, and tourist information. Staff include a paid community coordinator, tasked with developing Cletwr as a community hub.

Cletwr attracts both locals and visitors from further afield – it has become a destination for residents in nearby small towns, and is well located on a main road and national hiking trail for passing tourists. In 2019, Cletwr won the rural social enterprise of the year award at the UK-wide Rural Business Awards. The **benefits of the Cletwr hub model** include:

- Creating a **focal point** for the local community;
- Providing **volunteering** and **socialising** opportunities for **older residents**;
- Helping **young people** gain work experience and **new skills**;
- Generating **economic opportunities**, including for local producers.

Cletwr is operated as a company limited by guarantee, with community members and an elected management board. The non-profit business model relies on volunteers to keep operating costs and prices down, and uses profits from the shop and café to subsidise community activities. While Cletwr has received development grants from local and national government, and from EU funds, a key goal is to keep the business model sustainable and avoid dependence on external funding.

There are several **lessons for rural service hubs** from the Cletwr experience:

- To operate effectively, service hubs must **interface** with a range of other organisations, such as providers, funders, government and NGOs.
- New hubs need **external support**, through expert advice and development funding.
- However, **community needs** must drive the project, and regular **communication and consultation** is essential.
- It is equally vital not to exhaust **voluntary** time and energy; leadership is important, but so is the **capacity** of other community members to take over if necessary.
- A successful community enterprise needs to **operate sustainably** as a business – dependence on grants creates the risk that the hub will close if funding dries up.

Sources: Callaghan 2017, Cwmni Cletwr 2016, Plunkett Foundation n.d.

Case study 3: Supporting services through hub development in remote rural Finland

In Finland, village shops are closing their doors at an alarming rate. Many village shops struggle to keep their operations profitable and to develop their services. On average, 30 shops close each year. This has considerable negative impacts, especially in sparsely populated rural areas where village shops are often the last remaining service providers. To halt this decline, the Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry launched the nationwide 'Village Shops as Multi-Service Centres' pilot project in autumn 2019.



A rural village in Finland
© LUKE

The village shops project provides eligible shops in sparsely populated areas with a de minimus support grant to maintain and develop their business as a service hub. To qualify for the support, a shop, besides selling groceries, needs to co-locate at least one of the following services: post services, cash withdrawal, pharmacy services or fuel delivery.

By investing in the development of village shops as service hubs, the **project aims to:**

- Maintain and promote the **availability of services** of general economic interest in sparsely populated rural areas;
- Support the **vitality** of rural regions and their residents' **wellbeing**;
- Create **business opportunities** in sparsely populated regions;
- Ensure that rural services can also cater to large numbers of **seasonal residents**.

Over 200 entrepreneurs applied to participate in the village shop pilot, and more than 80 shops have received support for 2020-21. The pilot will be evaluated and, pending positive outcomes, there are plans to consolidate the project and extend support to other rural areas. One positive outcome is already apparent: the support has drawn new entrepreneurs, opening shops rather than closing them.

The village shops project is the first of its kind in Finland. In neighbouring Sweden, a similar grant has been in place since 2016, which has provided certainty for businesses and facilitated investment. Together, these projects suggest several **lessons for rural service hubs:**

- Hubs can be created simply and effectively by **widening the range** of services available at **existing facilities**.
- Government **funding** can be used to **strategically stimulate** hub development, without the government itself needing to become the hub operator or service provider.
- Hub models can **attract entrepreneurs**, but entrepreneurs also need **support to maintain and grow** their businesses in regions where traditional retail is no longer viable.
- In areas where **seasonal residents** are an important part of demographic patterns, hubs can help ensure services are maintained as the population fluctuates.

Sources: Finnish Food Authority, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry in Finland

Case study 4: Co-locating ATM machines in town halls in rural Valencia

In the province of Valencia (pop. 2.5 million) in eastern Spain, over 95% of the population live in urban areas. Unbalanced development has created challenges for rural services. Since the 2008 crisis, over 2,500 bank branches have closed in Valencia, with disproportionate rural effects. In January 2020, the regional government began a new initiative to improve rural access to financial services. The project co-locates ATM machines in town halls in rural municipalities.



*Castielfabib (pop 317) will receive a new ATM
© Ayuntamiento de Castielfabib*

Financial services are essential, and cash withdrawal helps people to spend in the local economy. In rural areas, a lack of access to local banking services especially disadvantages older people and those with limited mobility. By co-locating ATMs in town halls, Valencia's project uses existing public infrastructure in dispersed areas at relatively low cost. The project's **key steps** are:

- **Territorial diagnostics** to identify which areas lack access to financial services;
- **Liaising** between the regional government, municipalities, and financial institutions;
- **Making space** in the town hall for installation;
- **Maintaining** machines and ensuring they run day-to-day.

The ATM project is part of the Valencian Depopulation Agenda (AVANT), operated by the regional government with support from EU funds. Funds are used to commission, install and maintain the ATMs. There are also taxation exemptions available to the municipalities. To date, 124 small rural municipalities have signed up, and 135 machines are planned for installation. The project will run for four years.

Although the ATM project is only at the beginning of its planned cycle, there are already several **lessons for rural service hubs**:

- Hubs do not need to be large-scale – **small ambitions** can have **large impacts**.
- Losing certain services **affects some groups** more than others; co-locating services can help ensure **continued access** for those who need them most.
- Hub models can be **efficiently** developed using **existing public infrastructure**, and it is especially beneficial when that infrastructure is **already a local focal point**.
- To contribute to balanced growth in rural areas, hub models require rural-urban **cooperation mechanisms**.
- In places where commercially-run services are being withdrawn, hub models can offer **local and regional governments** ways to step in to **ensure provision**, without needing to become the direct provider.

Sources: Valencian Federation of Municipalities and Provinces (FVMP), University of Valencia

Case study 5: Converting village halls to digital hubs in rural Wales

Monmouthshire (pop 94,000) is a rural county with many small villages. Although within commuting distance to nearby cities, Monmouthshire shares digital connectivity challenges with more remote regions. To tackle the rural-urban digital divide and regenerate local community spaces, Monmouthshire County Council developed a project to equip village halls with superfast broadband.



Llanfair Kilgeddin village hall © Jaggery (cc-by-sa/2.0)

The rural-urban digital divide is not just a problem of poor internet and mobile coverage. Services from health to banking are increasingly going online – without reliable connections, rural residents cannot access these services. But, expanding coverage would take a large investment in infrastructure, which is often not economically feasible. Digital hubs offer smaller, cheaper rural solutions. Monmouthshire’s digital hub **project aimed to:**

- Improve **broadband provision** in the local area;
- Raise digital awareness and expand residents’ **digital skills**;
- Improve the **viability** of the village halls and **attract new users**.

The pilot began in 2018, with four village halls. Due to their rural locations, the halls needed creative technical solutions for superfast connections. All four halls were upgraded for accessibility and had superfast connections, Wi-Fi and digital equipment installed. The project is a partnership between individual hall committees, the area’s community council, and the county council, financed by the Welsh Government and EU funds.

The village halls are open to the community through a range of timetabled events and activities, including training on digital technology. They are also available to hire at affordable hourly rates for public and private users. Hire proceeds fund operations and maintenance. The technology offers other possibilities, including simulcasting live events from one hall into the others. Community council meetings are already being held in the halls, with broadcasts and skype creating new ways to engage with local democracy.

The village halls project suggests a number of **lessons for rural service hubs:**

- Hubs offer a way to make **targeted investment** when blanket provision is not feasible.
- Hub development can be used to **re-purpose existing rural facilities**, giving them a new lease of life and **expanding the user base**.
- Delivering digital infrastructure through hubs can help connect communities and create new ways to **bring people together** across age groups.
- **Partnerships** between hubs and local government bodies connect **community knowledge** about their own access needs with **resources and expertise** for service provision.

Sources: Monmouthshire County Council, Village Halls Abergavenny

Case study 6: Co-working hubs as a social innovation in rural Austria

Oberpinzgau (pop. 22,000) is an alpine region in the Austrian province of Salzburg. When a local retailer closed in the small municipality of Krimml (pop. 840), the LEADER Local Action Group supported a new use for the space – a coworking hub. Since 2018, four CoWorking PinzHub branches have been established in the district, offering digital infrastructure and workspaces for hourly, daily or weekly use.



*The CoWorking PinzHub space in Saalfelden
© Michael Sinnhuber*

Coworking spaces originated in cities, but have become increasingly relevant for rural areas, where digital technologies offer new opportunities for teleworking. While urban coworking spaces are typically run as businesses, rural hubs are more often premised on creating sustainable incentives for long-term regional economic viability. The **aims for PinzHub** include:

- **Facilitating business start-ups** and **providing space** for self-employed, freelance, and creative workers;
- **Addressing local economic challenges**, including high rents, retail vacancies, long commutes and a ‘brain drain’ of educated young people;
- **Supporting regional development** by linking users to other economic actors and integrating them into **local networks**.

PinzHub grew from one individual’s innovative idea. After the first hub opened, neighbouring municipalities saw the potential. Now, with four hubs, PinzHub is supported and financed by a partnership including municipalities, two LEADER LAGs, a bank, the regional chamber of commerce, Regional Council Oberpinzgau, Regional Management Pinzgau, and a technology hub company. PinzHub is projected to become financially self-sufficient in 2021.

Besides catering to local professionals and start-ups, the PinzHub model also responds to the alpine region’s tourist economy. Some hubs promote ‘workcations’, and are available to tourists and mobile workers. Some also offer seminar and meeting rooms for companies and associations.

The PinzHub model provides several **lessons for rural service hubs**:

- Cheap **working space**, along with **opportunities** to network, co-operate and learn are an **attractive offer** for well-qualified younger people who may otherwise leave rural areas.
- Tourism is an important economic sector for many rural regions, and hubs can link to this sector by understanding **tourists as a potential target group**.
- Growing a hub project from an idea into an effective initiative involves **cooperation amongst many stakeholders** across the region, including **expertise and experience**.
- By **addressing societal challenges** and engaging civil society stakeholders, rural hubs can be understood as forms of **social innovation**.

Sources: Corradini (2018), ÖAR & ZSI (2019), Sinnhuber (2018, 2019)

Case study 7: Putting the hub online for local government services in rural Latvia

Tukums (pop 29,943) is a rural municipality in western Latvia, centred on a small town. The population in more remote parts of Tukums is declining, increasing the costs of providing services, including the municipal government's own administration. To help residents connect with Tukums Municipality wherever they live, the municipality created a hub online. The hub is a digital portal to government services, that streamlines administrative services and reduces the need to travel to a distant government office.



The homepage for Tukums Municipality
© Tukums Municipality

Recent data from Latvia's Central Statistical Bureau shows that increasing numbers of Latvians use the internet to access information about and interact with public institutions. Tukums Municipality has been very active in using digital technology for local government. Surveys have also shown that local residents are receptive to accessing municipal services online. The Tukums **project aims to:**

- **Streamline** the municipality's administrative services in a **single online location**;
- Make service provision more **efficient** by simplifying and speeding up internal processes;
- **Improve access** to municipal services for people living in rural areas;
- **Reduce the time** residents need to spend getting administrative tasks done.

The 'back end', Lietvaris, was developed by a private company on behalf of Tukums Municipality, which funds the project and the digital infrastructure. Public servants use Lietvaris to efficiently process applications and service requests. Residents use the Tukums Municipality website.

The Tukums Municipality website also interfaces with and supplements the Latvian government's national online service portal, maintained by the State Regional Development Agency. This additional connection helps to improve access to public services more broadly, and makes it easier to navigate between the municipal and national sites.

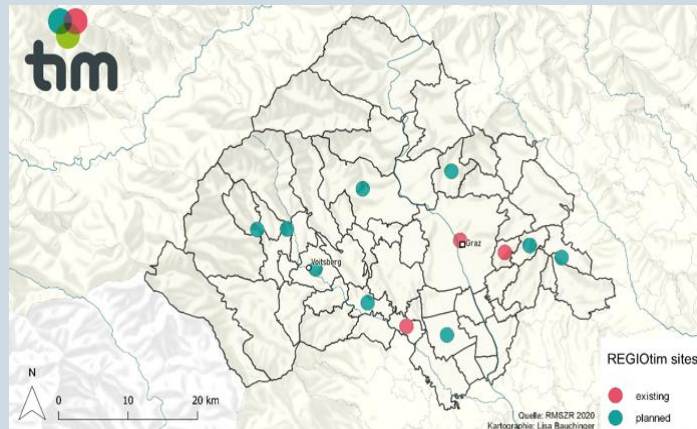
Although the implementation of the system is not yet complete, user feedback has been positive so far. The online portal offers a number of **lessons for rural service hubs:**

- A hub model does not necessarily need to be built in physical space; **online hubs** can also be targeted to tackle challenges for rural service provision and access.
- Online hubs can be especially beneficial in **reducing costs and lost time** by removing the need to travel.
- **By integrating administrative processes**, hub models can also be used to **create efficiencies** for municipal staff.
- **User-friendly integration** does not require all the services to be co-located – there are opportunities for hubs to help **connect users to services elsewhere**.

Sources: Baltic Studies Centre, Tukums Municipality, Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia 2018

Case study 8: Building a network of multimodal mobility hubs in rural Austria

The Metropolitan Area of Styria (pop. 494, 227) includes Austria's second largest city, Graz, as well as peri-urban, rural and remote municipalities. In such a diverse region, providing affordable transport services, without the need for private cars, for everyday users and commuters is a key challenge. In response, the Regional Management has partnered to develop REGIOtim – a network of multimodal mobility hubs, linking public transport with e-car sharing, charging stations, bicycle parking, micro-public transport and more.



Existing and planned REGIOtim sites
© Regionalmanagement SZR / Lisa Bauchinger

Multimodal transport involves using more than one mode of transport along different routes, or combining modes within a route. Multimodality offers alternatives to conventional transport infrastructure and complements existing public transport. To support urban multimodality, the City of Graz and transport operator Holding Graz Linien developed 'tim' – täglich.intelligent.mobil – in 2015. Could this successful urban-oriented project be adapted for peripheral rural areas?

In 2017, a pilot to extend 'tim' hubs beyond the city began, enabled by ERDF funding and the Interreg Peripheral Access project. The first regional hub opened in 2019. **Planning included:**

- **Adapting** urban service location criteria to suburban and rural access needs.
- **Identifying, categorising** and **prioritising** potential sites.
- Re-assembling **complex connections** between services and **cooperating partners**.

Existing public transport forms REGIOtim's base. The hubs help users combine the means of alternative transport that meet their needs, and access onwards journeys on the public network. Hubs locations were chosen to increase access, such as in population centres public places, or outside town halls and branch railway stations.

With most hubs yet to be constructed, it is still too soon to evaluate REGIOtim's success – but the project already offers **lessons for rural service hubs:**

- Hubs can be used to **link existing services** and infrastructures in **innovative new ways**.
- **Existing patterns** of mobility and service use can be built on to locate hubs in **convenient places** where people will be more likely to access them.
- A hub does not need to only be in a single location – there are many possibilities for **developing synergies** through **networks of hubs**.
- Alongside their key role in facilitating service provision and access, hubs can also support local and **regional transitions** to more sustainable futures.

Sources: Holding Graz 2019, RMSZR 2019

Case study 9: A new model for delivering primary healthcare in rural Austria

Haslach (pop. 5,000) is a rural municipality in Upper Austria, in the border region with Bavaria and the Czech Republic. When one of just two local General Practitioners (GPs) retired with no replacement found, momentum grew to find new solutions for the future of primary health care. Established in 2018, the new Primary Health Care Centre (PHC) in Haslach brings different health professionals together in the same place.



*The Primary Health Care Centre in Haslach
© Erwin Rebhandel*

In Austria, an estimated 60% of GPs contracted in primary health care will retire in the next five years. Solutions are urgently needed to secure the future for primary health care, especially in rural areas where services are already limited. In 2016, national health care reform policies provided for implementing 76 PHCs across Austria. PHC Haslach is one of two initial pilot projects in Upper Austria.

A PHC is a form of hub that co-locates other health professionals – such as physiotherapists, dieticians and midwives – together with GPs. A PHC can be developed by expanding an existing facility, or by designing and building from scratch. The **aims and advantages** of a PHC are:

- **Sharing the work** of healthcare delivery (which previously fell largely on local GPs);
- Creating opportunities for **collaboration** between different health professionals, including active health promotion;
- Offering a **wider range** of treatments and **longer opening hours**;
- Better **tailoring care** to patients' **individual needs**, and accompanying patients through the entire treatment route;
- Tailoring care to specific **needs in the local region**.

In Haslach, the idea for the pilot came from the remaining GP, and the municipality provided vacant premises and funded restoration. PHC Haslach now supports three GPs, three nurses, five assistants, and various other professionals including occupational therapy and social work. The PHC also hosts summer schools for medical students, and there are hopes that the model will attract young health professionals to rural areas. To ensure the care meets place-based needs, a citizens' council meets four times a year to provide feedback and advice.

PHC Haslach offers a number of **lessons for rural service hubs**:

- By responding to critical challenges, hubs can create **new future solutions** and more **innovative ways of working**.
- By **fostering collaboration** between services, hubs can better **spread the workload** of providing services, and reduce dependency on one or two key professionals.
- Hub models can **integrate services** to better meet individual and local needs.
- Hubs can **generate employment** and offer more **attractive working environments**.

Sources: BMASGK (2019), PHC Haslach

5. The future of rural service hubs

5.1. Learning from the case studies

The nine case studies profile a diverse range of rural service hubs, from community shops to transport, public administration to primary healthcare. These examples show that hubs can be developed in many different places and contexts, in order to tackle local and regional challenges in service provision and access. The table below summarises the case studies.

Case study	Sector	Challenges	Design
1 Allerleierei <i>Styria, Austria</i>	Food	Supporting local food in proximity to the city by linking producers and consumers. Creating a local circular economy.	Related services Integrated co-location
2 Cletwr <i>Ceredigion, Wales</i>	Food Community	Providing access to essential shopping needs. Strengthening community connections.	Diverse services Parallel co-location
3 Village shops <i>Remote rural Finland</i>	Food General	Ensuring service provision in sparsely populated areas. Preventing shop closures and supporting businesses.	Diverse services Parallel co-location.
4 Valencia ATM <i>Valencia, Spain</i>	Banking	Ensuring rural access to cash withdrawal facilities. Addressing market failure in financial service provision.	Diverse services Parallel co-location
5 Digital halls <i>Monmouthshire, Wales</i>	Community	Overcoming the rural-urban digital divide. Creating new purposes for existing community spaces.	Complementary services Serial co-location
6 PinzHub <i>Salzburg, Austria</i>	Business	Supporting rural start-ups and freelancers. Encouraging young professionals to stay in the region.	Related services Integrated co-location
7 Lietvaris <i>Tukums, Latvia</i>	Public	Helping rural residents to interact with the municipal government. Making public administration more efficient.	Diverse services Integrated co-location
8 REGIOtim <i>Styria, Austria</i>	Transport	Providing affordable, demand responsive transport in a rural-urban region. Reducing reliance on private cars.	Related services Integrated co-location
9 PHC Haslach <i>Upper Austria, Austria</i>	Healthcare	Ensuring the future for healthcare provision in rural regions. Building new synergies between healthcare professionals.	Complementary services Parallel co-location

5.2. Applying the ROBUST conceptual framework to service hubs

The ROBUST project developed a conceptual framework (Woods et al. 2018), combining key research concepts with good practice in regional policy (Fig. 3). The framework has three principles:

- **New localities** – Connecting the local by designing for the real areas in which we live, work and collaborate, and understanding how these link to wider networks.
- **Network governance** – Deciding together through participation in government and partnerships between sectors, to create systems and services for everyone’s needs.
- **Smart development** – Growing smart and sustainably by prioritising what each local economy can do best.

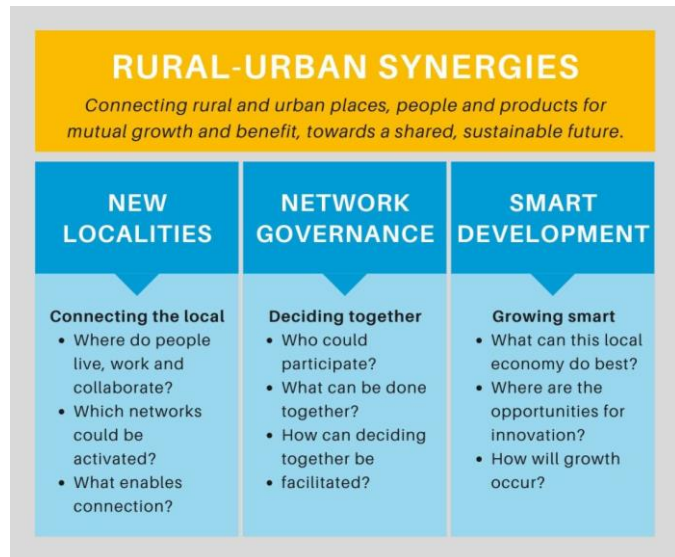


Figure 3: The ROBUST conceptual framework

These principles can be applied to identify good practice for rural service hubs.

5.2.1. Where should service hubs be developed?

New localities is the concept behind ROBUST’s approach to place. As geographical areas, localities are the building blocks for planning, service delivery and empowering communities. But, to be effective a locality needs to be a place that people identify with, and in which they share common experiences. Some localities are just the same as official maps of towns or regions, but many are not. Service hubs like Cletwr (Case 2) and Finland’s village shops (Case 3) play a vital function in making a locality ‘real’ by bringing people together. Similarly, when planning where to develop a service hub it is important to think about whether the area served is meaningful to people. Projects in Monmouthshire (Case 5) and Valencia (Case 4) have co-located new services in town/village halls, building on existing local identities.

5.2.2. How should service hubs be organised?

Network governance is a model for deciding together. Governance refers to how the work of governing a nation, region or initiative is organised. Network governance is concerned with participation from stakeholders, and how partnerships across sectors and scales function. Effective participation helps identify service provision and access needs within a locality, and enables communities to become involved in decision-making processes. This can involve developing and embracing new techniques to bring people together.

PHC Haslach (Case 9) holds a quarterly citizens' council; Cletwr (Case 2) is led by community members. Partnerships help coordinate services and link hubs to wider networks. REGIOtim (Case 8) connects regional mobility service providers. Monmouthshire's village halls (Case 5) link committees, community councils and local government. Tukums' online hub (Case 7) connects municipal and national government services. Valencia's ATMs (Case 4) link regional and local government and private companies.

5.2.3. What should service hubs provide?

Smart development is a strategy for growth that prioritises the strengths and opportunities in a specific local or regional economy. Hubs can be designed to foster these priorities, like local food and the circular economy in Styria (Case 1) or co-working spaces in Oberpinzgau (Case 6). Services themselves support regional growth, through business opportunities (Case 1, 3, 6) and economic inclusion (Case 4). After all, liveable regions are *workable* regions.



ROBUST partners collaborating to brainstorm challenges for public services © Allison Wildman

6. A planning guide for rural service hubs

Because there is no single model for a hub, there can be no one-size-fits-all checklist. This planning guide distils the key tools and ideas from this report to help direct discussion.

What is the challenge?				
Planning a hub should begin with identifying relevant local and/or regional challenges.				
Identify the service provision challenges How is it difficult to get services to people? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the rural challenges, p.4-5 Use the 4 questions, p.3 		Identify the service access challenges How is it difficult to get people to services? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the 5As, p.3 		
How could a service hub address the challenge?				
Understanding the challenges helps narrow the focus to intended outcomes.				
Assess the likelihood of expected benefits How, and to what extent, can a hub help? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider the general benefits, p.6 		Decide goals for specific benefits Are there additional important priorities? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reflect on challenges, above 		
How should the service hub be designed/developed?				
Exploring each of the four key features of a hub (p.6) offers ideas for planning.				
Key feature	Question	Key concepts		
At least 2, and ideally more, services are available on site	Which services?	Relatedness Are the services related? (p.7)	Network governance Which scales and sectors? (p.18)	Smart development Why these services? (p.18)
The site is a focal point for a wider catchment area	Where to locate?	Provision Where would provision be feasible? (p.3)	Access Where will be convenient for users? (p.3)	New localities Where is the locality's core? (p.18)
Synergies between services create efficiencies	Why co-locate?	Provision How could provision be more efficient? (p.3)	Integration How will services be integrated? (p.7)	Network governance What partnerships are needed? (p.18)
Associated infrastructure facilitates access	How to connect?	Access How will people get to and use the hub? (p.7)	New localities Are there existing infrastructures? (p.18)	Network governance What partnerships are needed? (p.18)

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