



# Digital connection is a human right: what role can rural village halls play?

## What is the make-up of rural village halls in England?

Village halls play a central role in communities in England, particularly in rural areas, in integrating people and creating a feeling of togetherness. There are an estimated 10,000 village halls in England, managing community assets of £3billion. More than 180 of these halls are in Northumberland.

Community and a sense of belonging are important for our well-being, and this is true of rural villages. Populations are small, service centres are often far away and inaccessible, and the provision of services and activities in the village is key to that sense of belonging.

### What research was carried out?

In November 2020 Community Action Northumberland (CAN), using funding from the National Lottery Community Fund, commissioned a digital review of rural village halls in Northumberland. As a society we are aware of the explosion in the need for access to digital services. What does this mean for rural areas with poor coverage? Is there a digital role for village halls in helping to connect rural communities in the future?



## What are the findings?

- An overview of existing policy contexts and examples of best practice.
- A survey of 99 village halls to establish the scale of their activities, their interest in broadband connection, and any perceived barriers.
- Case studies of six village halls - three of which were not connected, two had very good digital connection, and one that was connected but previously had not used it.
- Selecting two unconnected halls to identify options for broadband connection.

- Halls undertake a vast array of activities, tailored to meet the needs of their community.
- They are flexible about opening hours, charge extremely low hire fees, and provide for very small numbers that other providers might not consider viable.
- They are charities and spend a lot of time and energy fundraising to maintain their halls, and to provide services to their communities.
- They are aware of the need to become digitally connected in the 'new world' and the role they can play as community digital hubs.
- 83% of survey respondents are keen for their halls to be digitally connected.
- The single biggest barrier to being connected is cost.
- Halls are keen for CAN's Village Halls Portal - a website containing information on all village halls in Northumberland - to develop a training and support role, sharing best practice, tips on resources, and information about procedures.
- Ensuring community members are digitally 'safe' online is a major concern.
- Trustees had fundraised for devices and equipment during Covid-19 because they believe the future will be more digital, and it is essential that they are connected for their community.
- Halls are keen to ensure older people were digitally connected to combat social isolation.



There is evidence of halls with digital connection helping to combat hidden poverty in rural areas and assisting people in digital poverty.



## What are the conclusions?

Post-Covid-19 it is not simply that digital connection is essential, digital connection must be seen as a human right. Policy and political commitment can ensure that all communities, including rural ones, are digitally connected. Many people now rely on digital access to bank, shop, pay bills and to access government and healthcare services.

Rural Cornwall, as the most digitally connected region in Europe, is an example of how an overarching commitment, working with rural village halls, can ensure remote rural communities are connected.

Halls have a central role to play in the digital future of rural communities. They have the capacity and the will to become the digital heart of villages and are sensitive to the needs of their community.





## What are workable recommendations for the future?

### Connection – broadband

- Larger broadband providers offer a charity rate - at present the only options are residential or business, with many halls charged a business rate.
- Public funds are made available to assist village halls to access devices and the same devices, such as laptops and tablets, are purchased across halls to assist future training.

### Connection – the community

- Devices are lent to people in the community, with training, so they learn how to use them over a set period of time, including a data sim for those people who do not have an internet connection at home.
- Northumberland Learning and Skills Team continue to work closely with halls to identify and meet their needs.
- The programme of digital champions – people who are enthusiastic about digital connection – be rolled out for the halls.
- A 'help desk' which can provide support to halls once the skills of their champions have been fully utilised is set up.
- Training which incorporates best practice, staying safe online and addresses people's needs is provided. Furthermore, that it is segmented and arranged to encourage take-up.
- CAN uses the Village Halls Portal to organise training sessions and exchange best practice as a safe learning space.

### Social inclusion and the village halls

- The role of halls in tackling hidden rural poverty is recognised and resourced.
- The role of halls in providing a safe and supportive learning environment is recognised and resourced, given that the lack of skills and qualifications in rural areas is a policy concern.

### Improving and diversifying the role of village halls

- Raise awareness with halls of the many ways IT can enhance the activities already undertaken.
- Support and resources for halls is provided to increase provisions as services are cut and reduced in rural areas, such as rural cinemas, and post offices.
- Halls are supported to provide new and emerging activities such as funerals and weddings, which are more inclusive with digital connection.

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[www.ncl.ac.uk/cre](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cre) or  
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**David Kemmett, Research Associate**  
[kemmettd409@gmail.com](mailto:kemmettd409@gmail.com)

**Hannah Budge, PHD Researcher**  
[h.budge2@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:h.budge2@newcastle.ac.uk)

**Sally Shortall, Duke of Northumberland  
Chair of Rural Economy**  
[sally.shortall@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:sally.shortall@newcastle.ac.uk)