

The third Thematic Group (TG) meeting demonstrated how many exciting initiatives are converging - not just to overcome the rural digital divide - but to ensure a genuine “digital transformation” of rural areas. This means going beyond digital innovations in individual services to intervene across the entire digital “ecosystem”. Examples showed that rural villages and communities do not have to wait until the perfect broadband infrastructure is in place. There are EU policies and tools to help them work simultaneously to improve connectivity, skills and the application of digital technologies.

In the afternoon, participants explored some of the practical steps for progressing digital innovation in rural areas: - how to find the right digital solutions, how to set up effective rural digital hubs and how to identify and develop skillsets. They also heard about the new pilot initiative on “Smart Eco-social Villages”. Finally, MEPS Tibor Szanyi and Franc Bogovic rounded off the meeting by highlighting the growing momentum behind Smart Villages and the future activities of the ERP.

Event Information

Date: 21 February 2018

Location: Brussels, Belgium

Organiser: ENRD Contact Point

Participants: 65 - including EU institutions, European organisations, Managing Authorities, National Rural Networks, Local Action Groups (LAGs) and researchers.

Outcomes: Exchange of examples and identification of some of the key enabling conditions to support digital innovation in provision of rural services.

Website: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/3rd-meeting-thematic-group-smart-villages_en

Designing ICT services at rural level



“An ICT Service is just one of the tools but not the only one for achieving social innovation in rural areas”

according to [Steffen Hess](#), responsible for the [Digital Villages project](#) of the Fraunhofer Institute. In many cases though, digital innovation in rural areas has the potential to solve major challenges, bring together key actors (residents, municipalities, research and industry) and support social innovation. The involvement of the local citizens from the start in is a key success factor as digital innovation depends heavily on the acceptance of the users in a digital “ecosystem”. This requires going beyond broadband and cellular network connectivity to measure the overall level of digital maturity and assess people’s capacity to use digital technologies. It is important to clearly map peoples’ problems and needs and available solutions and ideas.

The European Commission has called on Member States to create a network of Broadband Competence Offices to promote knowledge-exchange, overcome broadband project hurdles and build capacity in the areas of funding, planning and policy. Very importantly it will also assist in accelerating the uptake of public funds for broadband. The Commission’s action plan for rural broadband involves 6 actions. These will help strengthen the BCO Network, create broadband country missions and put in place a common methodology for planning, mapping and monitoring broadband investments. It will also put in place a mechanism to run rural proofing tests, update broadband investment and state aid guidelines and establish a Rural Broadband Project Framework.



Basic Conditions for digitising rural services: State of play of EU broadband coverage and need for demand stimulation, [Jan Dröge](#), (BCO SF),

76% of EU citizens are connected to Next Generation Access (NGA) infrastructure BUT only 40% in rural areas. Market failure and lack of private investment create need for public intervention.



Lessons from Smart Cities – for Smart Villages (Belgium), [Nathalie Dumarey](#), VVSG

The word ‘Smart’ is often used as a label, but becoming a smart city or smart village is not a goal in itself. We need to be innovative and aware of new technologies, but the focus must be on the challenges faced by our villages related to the environment, the local economy, mobility, social cohesion etc. Digital innovation can be used as an enabler to help address these issues. When the challenges are clear, we can start to define our goals and adapt policy accordingly.

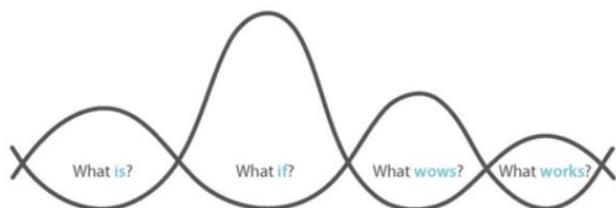
It is important to start with a lucid vision so that when the possibility of funding a project arises we have already defined what we want to achieve. Citizens will play a huge role in turning cities and villages into livable and thriving places. Cities that are built on a technology-led approach have less chances of surviving than cities that have a user-led approach and put the needs of citizens first. It is essential to know your citizens: their age, education and digital literacy.



Key steps and issues when designing rural digital services and valuing their socio-economic & environmental impact,

Clive Peckham, Emilija Stojmenova Duh, ERUDITE, Interreg EUROPE

First of all, the objectives of rural communities need to be defined and prioritised together with local citizens, public bodies and businesses. Then e-services can be identified, prioritised and designed through an open innovation process. By clearly identifying outcomes and indicators we can predict and monitor impact and return on investment. Trust is key for the entire process and this can be improved through training and by improving digital literacy.



Market Place: Examples of digital innovation in the provision of rural services

Participants had the chance to meet and exchange with the representatives of six inspiring examples of digital innovation from different EU rural areas. These covered topics such as, healthcare, mobility, energy efficiency, digital hubs and co-working spaces, digital infrastructure and training (see the project portal for background material).



Group Discussions: Drivers for digitising rural services

1. Finding the right digital solution - developing or purchasing/customising existing solutions

The participants defined a set of key factors to consider during the planning process: i) the development or purchase of a solution should be based on clearly defined requirements, goals and needs and whether existing relevant tools can be found in the market; (ii) there should be a combination of strategic top-down and bottom-up approaches – both to ensure the existence of the right EU and national rules and specifications - as well as to identify ideas and actions on local and regional levels; (iii) efficient collaboration between public and private sector can ensure the right decision is made when selecting the appropriate tools; (iv) Business models and operational strategies should be in place to measure financial impact and weigh the benefits; (v) A common messages was to involve people from the very beginning of conceptualization and decision making;

2. Rural digital hubs and co-working centres as catalysts for digitising rural services

Rural digital hubs can play a crucial role as multipliers in the digital transformation of rural areas. They usually involve some kind of physical space; their essential characteristic is that they are based around people who are actively using digital technologies to promote the digitization of specific rural areas. They can have different objectives (more economic or social) and operate at different levels – ranging from sophisticated university-based innovation hubs to digital training provided from a village community center. They usually offer a tailor-made mix of activities and services such as spaces for coworking and interaction, demonstration facilities, fab-labs, training, cultural activities and so on. A key message is that they must be firmly based on an understanding - both of what is needed by local people and what can be sustained.

3. Identifying and developing skillsets

It is important to map the level of digital skills and the existing take up and digital needs of different groups of the population, businesses and local institutions. Some groups like the elderly may be increasingly excluded from certain eservices and local firms may be losing out on new markets. Local community and educational centers with support from LAGs can act as hubs for improving digital skills. Funds for broadband should be complemented by support for digital skills.

The Thematic Group Meeting was followed by a practical training offered by the ERUDITE Interreg Network on the key steps for involving local people in the design of digital services in rural areas. Find out more [here](#).