

How to Scale Rural Enterprise

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“

If you're sitting alone and you can't work out the solution, it becomes much easier to go 'Oh well, I just won't bother.' As a Hub and with our Champions we brought new digital skills to local businesses but the project also helped to reduce the isolation many new businesses experience. The other thing is the businesses are just such an interesting, diverse lot. They're doing amazing stuff and you just get a tremendous buzz out of it that you're part of making that work.”

**Tanya Cook, A1 Community Works -
Digital Enterprise Hub**

Introduction:

This How To Guide sets out what we know about how community organisations can work with other individuals and organisations to support rural SMEs with digital. It sets out how community organisations who are skilled at engaging and supporting rural businesses to use digital, can scale this support as an extension of the services they already provide.

All the advice is based on findings from a Digital Enterprise pilot project run by Good Things Foundation from October 2018 to March 2020, funded by Prince's Countryside Fund. It aimed to test how community organisations who are skilled at engaging and supporting rural businesses to use digital (hereby known as 'Digital Enterprise Hubs') can train other community organisations or individuals (hereby known as 'Digital Enterprise Champions') to carry out a similar role.

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Rural SMEs and digital

Digital skills are important for businesses because they can help them to connect with their clients, local community and other businesses. By broadening their digital skills, businesses can find new ways to promote themselves, raise their profile, buy and sell things online, reach existing and new audiences and make what they do more efficient. But with more and more services going online - including interacting with HMRC and banking - many small businesses are getting left behind.

However it's not easy to upskill when you're a sole trader or small business owner who doesn't necessarily have the time to go on a course. Lack of confidence with digital can also be a big barrier. In this situation, one to one support is vital, especially for start-ups in their first year.

The Hub and Champion model is successful because it helps support smaller businesses who might otherwise be priced out by other providers. It makes learning accessible by creating a network of problem solving facilitators, engaging people in their homes, local pubs and cafes.



This **map** shows the location of the Hubs and Champions that took part in the Digital Enterprise pilot, and the small businesses they managed to reach.

Here are some examples of the support provided by Digital Enterprise Champions to SMEs during the pilot:

A business owner from a travelling community in North Yorkshire had previously struggled to get any support because web designers wouldn't agree to come to the traveller site. She reached out to Digital Enterprise Champion Victoria as a trusted person in the community, who showed her how to set up a webpage for her beauty business using Wordpress.

Another business owner in North Yorkshire couldn't edit her existing website. Victoria worked with them to set up a business page for their arts and crafts business, as well as using MakeItClick resources for self-learning. Since then she has received more business due to learning about SEO ranking, including higher profile clients who provide larger and more consistent income.

A farmer had been passing all receipts and accounts to a bookkeeper to manage but didn't know how to view the financial state of their business. Champion Julia met them every 2 weeks to discuss using digital to access cheaper materials, monitor accounts and make savings. The client can now manage their own accounts online, save money in running the business and spread awareness of the benefits of using digital in local farming networks



Who are Digital

Enterprise Champions?

The aim of a Digital Enterprise Champion is to reduce levels of digital isolation in rural communities by significantly increasing the outreach provided by Digital Enterprise Hubs. With the support from both Digital Enterprise Champions and Digital Enterprise Hubs, rural communities can access services helping them to grow, becoming more productive and sustainable, connected and confident.

The role of the Digital Enterprise Champion is voluntary and an additional support service on offer to rural SMEs. If successful, Champions can consider charging for support where appropriate, providing them with an additional source of income.

Digital Enterprise Champions are:

- Current or previous business owners, or people who have worked in the business sector and have the relevant skills and knowledge.
- Passionate - understanding the need for digital learning in rural communities. They are advocates for digital skills who understand the benefits.

- 'One of us'. They can relate to isolated rural communities and understand the challenges they face. They could have experience of rural isolation or be used to supporting people in rural areas.
- Connected. Active in the community. Trusted and local.
- Those with links to specific excluded groups in the community like Nepalese ex-soldiers and the travelling community in Richmond, or the arts and crafts community in Settle.
- People with a natural inclination to support others. Those that peer mentor others, that say "look I'll show you" or "here's what I learnt recently". They may even be used to supporting people to learn digital skills in the community already.

Engaging with SMEs: Digital Enterprise Champion Julia finds one of the main challenges is getting clients to "believe in you". She thinks trust is a big factor in rural communities and she works to establish rapport with clients, which in turn generates word of mouth referrals. Julia works on how she pitches services to clients and tailors it to how her support can benefit them. This includes continuously adapting her training.



The skills Champions need

Digital skills:

- Willingness to stay on top of current social media and PR trends.
- Awareness and working knowledge of the platforms the Hubs use such as Google Digital Garage, Wix and Making Tax Digital.
- The ability to keep track of who they are supporting.

Problem solving skills:

- Knowing where to find the things that people need.
- Willingness to signpost to other support when necessary.
- There are lots of different SMEs with different specialisms. Support can span sectors, for example farm diversification, so Champions will need to have the curiosity and capability to find resources that will help.

Business skills:

- Being a sounding board for business ideas.
- Lived experience of running a business.
- Understanding local markets and gaps.

People skills:

- Understanding how to engage with different audiences – good communication skills and an outgoing personality.
- Having patience and being able to reassure others.

Rural expertise:

- Understanding the specific needs of rural businesses and how to assess them.



The role of the Digital

Enterprise Champion

The Digital Enterprise Champion role is that of a facilitator or coach rather than a teacher or tutor. Champions are there to offer support to businesses on a one to one basis. But perhaps most importantly **to support SMEs to do it for themselves rather than doing it for them.** If the SME lacks confidence, then the Champion can initially provide the content and a volunteer could do it on their behalf, with the aim of building up the SME's confidence to try it for themselves eventually.

It's important to have a strong relationship between Hub and Champion as it's not necessarily about the Champion knowing the skills straight away. The Hub should meet with the Champion and see what skills they have and what they might need the Hub to support them in gaining.

The Hub needs to be clear about:

- **Expectations** - prepare the Champion for refusals from SMEs.
- **Requirements** e.g. time - how much time should the Champion spend with an SME? How often could the Champion be available? What does good support look like?
- **Networking** - The importance of Champions maintaining their networks with local businesses, community organisations and the local authority for example.
- **Promotion** - The value of rural digital support so they can promote themselves clearly and confidently.
- **Charging for support** - Many rural businesses don't have the funds available to pay for ongoing digital support. Work with the Champion to find ways they can provide some free support to SMEs, after which they can pay for further support if they are able, or be signposted elsewhere. Running costs can be too expensive for Champions to provide support for free, all of the time. Help them to set out clear guidelines to manage the expectations of SMEs.
- **Managing demand** - When support becomes a service and how the Champion can manage this.
- **When to cut strings with SMEs** - Champions can't provide prolonged support for free.



How to engage with

Digital Enterprise Champions

If you are a community organisation that supports rural businesses to use digital and would like to work with Digital Enterprise Champions to scale this support, here's where to start:

1. Take your time to understand your community and think about finding Champions that meet the needs of the community.
2. Don't rush the recruitment process. Hubs in the Digital Enterprise pilot recommended allowing a 6 month period for recruitment. This gives the hub the time to understand what skills they need from Champions, create a recruitment campaign on social media and in local press, and connect with local networks to find people with those skills.
3. Incentives for Champions - what's in it for them? For example, during the pilot each Champion was given a £500 Activation Grant for them to use to help them set up. Advise Champions on useful ways to spend this grant such as on some mobile technology to aid their work.

Looking for Champions in the following places in your local area:

People and networks:

- Council leaders
- Local Economic Development Officers
- Chambers of Commerce
- Local Enterprise Partnerships

In the community:

- Rural drop-ins
- Local networking events

Online:

- [The Federation of Small Businesses](#)
- Advertise on social media
- Newsletters and eshots



Champions working

with SMEs

Once in the role, here are the key stages of how a Champion might work with an SME.

1. **Meeting local need:** First they will need to think about who to help, for example farmers or home based start-ups. This will inform the best places, people and groups to approach first.
2. **Engagement:** Word of mouth can be extremely fruitful. Champions can try reaching out to their:
 - [Local Enterprise Partnership](#)
 - District Council
 - [Local Virgin Start Ups](#)
 - [National Enterprise Network](#)
 - Local Agricultural Society
3. **Assess needs:** The Champion should have an initial conversation with the SME to understand their needs.
4. **Getting them going:** It's important that the Champion gets them to have a go with something and then check in with them either face to face or over the phone to see how they are getting on. Remember it's about supporting them to do things themselves rather than doing it for them. This will give them the confidence and skills to keep going when the Champion isn't there.

5. The sorts of things Champions may need to support SMEs with:

- Basics like how to use a computer and email
- Home access advice
- Word processing like writing business letters and spreadsheets
- Social media - Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Blueprint
- Online marketing
- Creating websites - utilizing website builders such as Wordpress and Wix.
- Information and guidance on self employment
- Networking
- Online tax returns

Self-employment and farming

Digital Enterprise Champions can support farmers with skills such as:

- Learning how to do online tax returns and bookkeeping
- Computerised accounting
- Grants for wind turbines
- Help with marketing their business online





Supporting Digital

Enterprise Champions

It's important for Hubs to take time to nurture and help Champions to understand what this kind of community digital support entails. Hubs should:

Mentor the Champions:

- Invite them in for a chat to show them how the hub works
- Give them the opportunity to shadow the Hub on the kind of queries they might get
- Analyse their needs, their existing kit and the resources they have available. Do they need any extra support?
- Build their confidence
- Signpost to potential partnerships, network events, funding opportunities. Give them time to make initial connections.
- Encourage Champions to join a local networking group. If there are none available, the hub can advise them to create one.
- Keep in touch using calls, video calls and online platforms

- Help Champions market what they do by ensuring they understand the value of the support they are offering and how to talk positively about it with SMEs. Train them to make the most of digital marketing techniques.

Support them with training:

- How to use Learn My Way and FutureLearn with SMEs.
- On software packages for specific skills like accounting and book-keeping – preferably free software packages to replace paid alternatives.
- How to apply for funding.
- Self-employment, business and tax needs, how to assess pensions.
- Using timesheets and CV builder software.
- Examples of support that could be provided like Facebook for Business or Google Reviews.



Useful tools for

Digital Enterprise Champions

“My Hub recommends good packages and that makes me confident to teach others”

- Share any tried and tested Impact Assessment tools so that Champions can see the change in the SMEs they are supporting [Learn My Way](#).
- Specialist software like [Farmplan](#): Farm management, crops and livestock software for record keeping and compliance to help UK farms and rural businesses improve performance.
- Open source programs like [GCF LearnFree](#) (including Microsoft Word and Excel; Google Drive).
- If they have digital skills but want to improve social media, start with [Google Digital Garage](#).
- [MakeItClick](#) - free courses, tools and templates to help people to progress in their work.
- How to use open source tools like [Harvest Timesheet App](#), [Grammarly](#), [Poster My Wall](#), [Pablo](#), [Canva](#) and [PicMonkey](#).
- [Join the Online Centres Network](#) which includes a newsletter comprising the latest free training, networking opportunities and funding.
- Possible membership to [The Federation of Small Businesses](#) - £10 per month for breakfast meetings.

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