



# Helping Rural Businesses Thrive

A toolkit for supporting rural business with digital skills



Developed by:



**Good Things**  
Foundation

Improving lives through digital



SUPPORTED BY  
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# Introduction

Businesses can thrive in the countryside - even if their rural location presents extra challenges - and digital can be an essential tool to help them get started on their journey to success. The opportunities that the internet presents are endless and improved digital skills can turn a budding small enterprise into a roaring success.

This guide is for individuals or organisations starting a project supporting rural businesses with digital skills. It will help you to overcome barriers and provide you with useful resources to help you become a Rural Enterprise Champion.

## What it means to be a Rural Enterprise Champion

As a Rural Enterprise Champion, you have a unique place in the rural economy. You provide community-level support that has a big impact. You are a connector who makes things happen. You could be an individual or a local organisation.



Rural people know how to diversify, cooperate and collaborate to get things done. Digital can help them to do this but too often, when it comes to digital, rural people are left behind and aren't able to progress.

**You can help. First, get to know:**

The local businesses and potential sole traders in your area.  
Who can grow? Who needs your help to start-up?

Second, talk to those already supporting enterprise in your area. This could include:



Local Enterprise Partnerships\*

Councils eg. Parish or Rural Community Councils

Development Funds

\* England only

# How we developed this guide

Good Things Foundation is the UK's leading digital social change organisation. We work with thousands of community partners across the UK - the Online Centres Network - helping them build digital into their social mission.

For the last three years, thanks to funding from the Prince's Countryside Fund, Good Things Foundation and three Online Centres have worked together to explore what it takes to be a Rural Enterprise Champion helping small businesses use digital technology. Together, this group of Online Centres helped 75 small and medium sized rural businesses and community organisations and around 950 people who live and work in rural communities.

We worked with:

- A1 Community Works, North Yorkshire - Tanya Cook
- Lincs Training, Lincolnshire - Rich Avison
- Destinations @ Saltburn, Cleveland - Paul Davies

*Find out more about them later in this toolkit.*

The project has enabled us to learn what it takes to successfully support rural businesses with digital skills and to help them grow and improve. This toolkit is a record of what we learnt. It covers four core topics:

- Rural Enterprise Champion - the role
- what works
- what to be aware of
- what our delivery partners wish they had known at the beginning of their journey

## Rural Enterprise Champion - the role

The internet can change the way in which business works. It can help businesses do everything from bookkeeping to connecting with new customers.

As a Rural Enterprise Champion, your first step is to help businesses understand how the internet can work for them.

Each business is different. It is your job to connect with rural businesses and find the digital solutions that will help them. To successfully support rural enterprises you will need to be:

- patient
- flexible
- business savvy
- a networker
- a great communicator

Rural businesses need your help. They might already struggle because of:

- poor internet connectivity
- increased transport costs
- lack of digital support





## What works

### Build up your network

You can't do this by yourself. You'll need to connect with people and build your network, to help you to find people who need support. You'll want to build relationships with people and organisations who can support you. Talk to local community champions who are well connected in their village, as well as local organisations who might offer you space and free WiFi which can be invaluable.

### Look for other support

The people or businesses that need your support may be connected to other organisations. These might include Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), community groups, business networks, or local funded initiatives. Find and connect with these groups, and understand what they do so that you don't duplicate it. They will help you to connect with the people who need your support.

### Be a connector

The community sector is all about give and take. As you meet people, think about how you can help them. Set up their laptop, connect them with

someone useful, or link them to new customers. This will help you build up trust with individuals and the communities they are in.

### Word of mouth

Networking is important as many people will come to you through word of mouth. Once you've helped someone, they're likely to tell their friends, so more people will know about the support you can offer. Take time to make sure you can build up a good reputation.

### Most people use digital technology in some way

Most people use digital technology for a few things, but they don't always know how it can help them to make their work easier. That's where you come in. Look for people who are infrequent users and businesses that are starting out, and you can help them to understand how to make the internet work for them.



## Common problems & how to overcome them

### Reliable IT equipment

IT equipment can let you down at the worst moment. Be prepared for the internet to stop working or your client's laptop to need an update before you start. Think about ways to overcome this.

Be patient, prepare some offline work that you can do with the client, and carry a WiFi dongle to provide a reliable internet connection.

### It can become overwhelming

You will be providing much needed support to individuals and businesses, but you also need to run your own business. Be careful not to take on too much and be prepared to say 'no' or 'not right now' if you need to balance your time.

One way to balance your time is to help your clients to be more self-reliant. A good way to do this is by giving them free memory sticks, preloaded with useful templates and links. This gives your clients something to take with them and action.

### There may not be any formal support

The support that you will be providing is likely to be unique. In the past, the local authority might have supported small businesses and sole traders. It's unlikely that they still provide direct support.

Town and parish councils are a great place to find connections and expertise. However, it's quite unlikely that they will have the funds to support you with funds or staff time.

### It's rarely the thing they say it is

You'll find that people will describe the support they need by telling you the solution that they think they need. In order to provide useful support, take them back a few steps to work out what the problem is that they're trying to solve. Once you know that, you'll be able to guide them to the right solution. A lot of your work will be helping people ask better questions.

For example, someone might come to you for advice on setting up a website to make sales, but a profile on an online shopping website, such as eBay or Amazon, might better suit their needs.



## What they wish they'd known

We asked the three Rural Enterprise Champions what they wish they'd known about delivering a rural digital skills programme at the start of the project. Here's what they said:

*"I could have been more prepared for the digital needs of the farming community. The internet is really important to farmers, but they often pay a huge cost for the internet. Many of the farms I visited were using a satellite or even a radio connection. Their internet bills were huge, so I found myself thinking up all sorts of solutions to improve their access."*

**Rich Avison, Lincolnshire**



### People can be suspicious of things that are free

Offering free support sounds great (and it is), but some people might think it's too good to be true. They might not see the value in something that is free or think they will have to pay hidden costs later. Be prepared to have to 'sell' something that's free.

### It won't happen overnight

It takes time to build a reputation, time for a new service to build momentum, and time to get the message out to the people who need help. Give it time and invest in the places that need it the most.

### Building trust takes time

Supporting someone to do something new is not easy. It requires trust. Trust that you are the right person to guide them and trust that you're working in their best interests. You've been in their shoes before. It was your first time getting online once. Talk to them as a peer, not as an expert, and you'll soon build up trust.



## People fear the unknown

Trust helps people to try new things, but people don't become confident straight away. It takes time and practice. Be prepared to show people the same thing more than once. With patient support they will become confident users of digital technology.

*"I would have made video recordings of all the clients and put them on Facebook. I used all sorts of ways to connect with small businesses around North Yorkshire, but I feel like I missed the opportunity to use the internet to properly promote what I was doing."*

**Tanya Cook, North Yorkshire**



## Transport

Rural transport links aren't always frequent or reliable. Expect to be on the road, travelling to where people are and need support most.



*"I wish I had been more prepared for how eager rural businesses were to learn. People living in rural areas want to get online. Businesses know that the internet can help them but they don't know where to start. They are in a state of digital anticipation. They want to get a handle on all of the possibilities of the internet that they've heard of, and they don't want to lose any more time."*

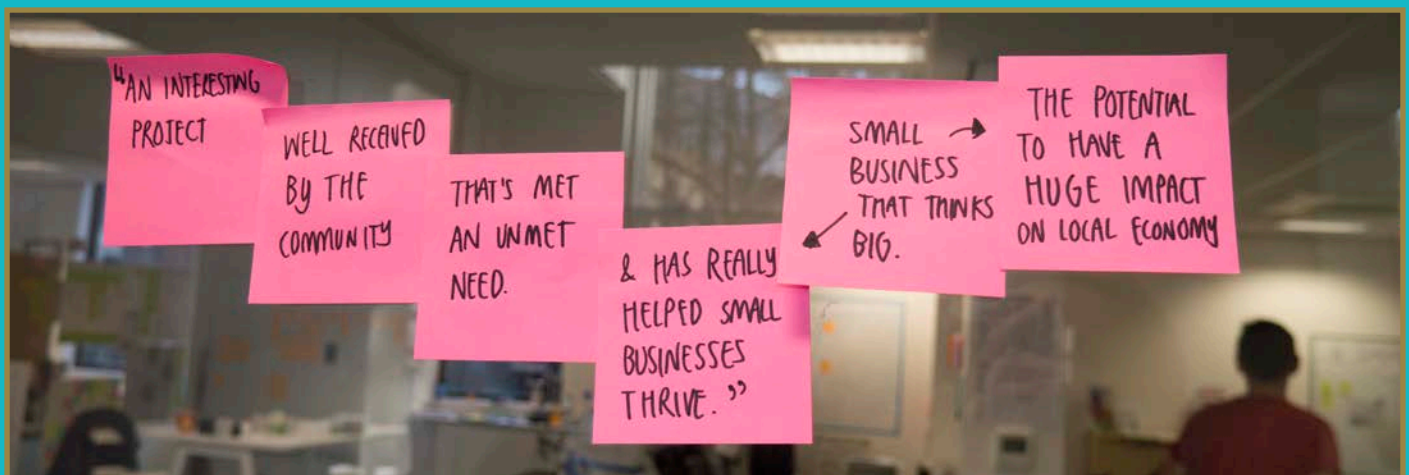
**Paul Davies, Cleveland**

## New places, new people

Cast your net wide. To reach the right people you might have to build links with people in other villages. At each one you will get to know the community infrastructure; the councils, businesses and people who can help you to get the word out about the support you can offer.

## Connectivity

Access to reliable broadband can be patchy at best in rural areas. Some rural areas are much more connected than others so be prepared to meet people with very different experiences of getting online.





# What you can do next

Drawing on the insight from this project, there are some key steps you can take to position yourself or your organisation as a Rural Enterprise Champion.

## Find the right people

- Connect with local organisers like local authorities, rural community councils, farming networks eg. National Farmers Union and business groups. They will help you to network and understand the local picture.
- Build relationships with the support networks in your community.
  - Talk to schools, colleges and universities to understand how you can support those leaving education who may need support. Identify whether you need to meet any specific requirements such as DBS.
  - Connect with your local Jobcentre Plus to meet unemployed people who want to set up their own business but don't know where to start.
  - Build a network of trusted experts - such as accountants, solicitors and business coaches - who can support you. When a business asks a question you can't answer, you can refer them to a professional you trust.

## Find the right places

- Find places to meet people and access the internet. This could be local businesses, libraries, village halls or community centres. Work out the best way to travel to these places and deliver your support.
- Find places to promote what you do. You can do this through your networks, but through direct engagement too. For example, try talking to small businesses at your local market.



## Use resources that work

- Free web-based services like [Buffer](#) / [Hootsuite](#) manage and schedule social media output so you don't have to spend all of your time online.
- [Ninite](#) is a tool to help find and quickly install free open source software.
- [Learn My Way](#) is a free online learning platform to help people learn basic digital skills.
- The [gov.uk](#) website is the central site of UK legislation. Use the [HMRC webpages](#) to help businesses to understand how to comply with government regulations.
- Small businesses often want to create a website for their business. There are lots of free ways to do this. Lots of businesses find that [Facebook](#) best suits their needs.
- [Business Balls](#) is a great free resource for business skills.

## Join the Online Centres Network

Online Centres benefit from a range of support, advice and resources from Good Things Foundation to help others thrive online. To find out more, go to:

[www.onlinecentresnetwork.org/join-the-network](http://www.onlinecentresnetwork.org/join-the-network)





**We would like to thank our three Online Centres for all of their hard work throughout the project and for sharing their skills and expertise to help us create this toolkit.**

**A1 Community Works is a social enterprise operating across Hambleton, Richmondshire and North Yorkshire, with strong links into the rural business community and an outreach-based model.**

**Lincs Training provides business support, online learning and community learning in outreach locations across rural Lincolnshire, with a range of local partners including housing associations.**

**Destinations@Saltburn is a community resource and learning hub for the Saltburn and East Cleveland area, delivering a range of business skills and online learning centred around a community cafe.**



**Online Centres  
Network**



