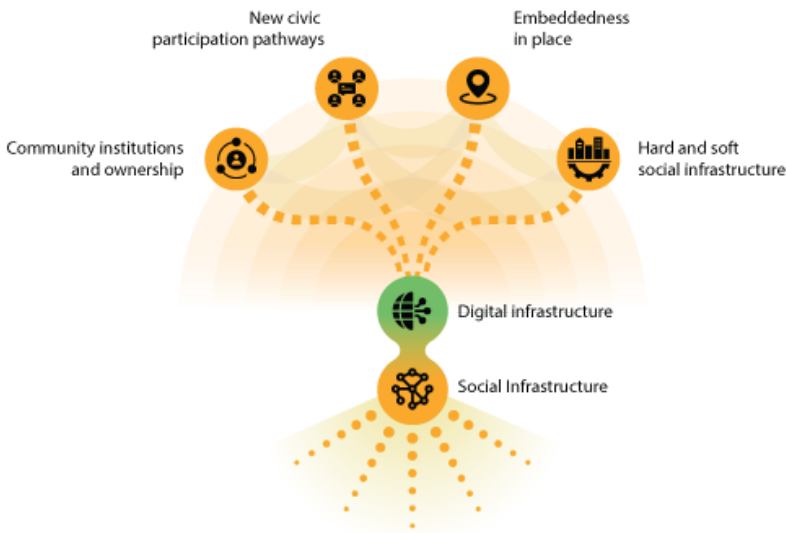# Digital Neighbourhoods, Cornwall:
From the Smart Village to the Civic Networked Village

#digital placemaking #Smart Villages #civic networks #digital inclusion #social infrastructure
#effective access #community assets #place-based approach

- **Social and spatial infrastructures to embed digital infrastructures**
- **Digital technologies to strengthen social capital and civic engagement**
- **Place-based and community-owned approaches to digitalisation**
- **Digital inclusion for policy progress on health and social inequalities, and sustainable inclusive growth**

New civic participation pathways

Embeddedness in place

Community institutions and ownership

Hard and soft social infrastructure

Digital infrastructure

Social Infrastructure

New types of social capital, civic engagement and community resilience

The Digital Neighbourhoods research project [2013-2017] in Cornwall explored how superfast broadband access can best be integrated into rural communities to deliver on its transformative economic and social potential, and **how digital divides can be overcome** by leveraging existing social infrastructures and semi-public spaces such as libraries and village halls.

The research supported the implementation of the EU-funded £68 million **Superfast Cornwall programme (2011-current)**, the biggest single investment of the EU Convergence programme and as a rural broadband pilot in the most economically deprived region of Europe.

Cornwall is seen as a digital 'notspot' - a remote, rural region with poor internet connectivity. Over half of the population (56%) live outside of towns, with 42% in rural settlements. Many of these villages have issues with isolation - economically, geographically and socially, factors which often correlate with digital exclusion.

KEY OBJECTIVES

understand the impact on communities of introducing large-scale technological infrastructure to rural, deprived regions

understand how people interact in digital social networks and how this impacts social cohesion and helps overcome digital divides
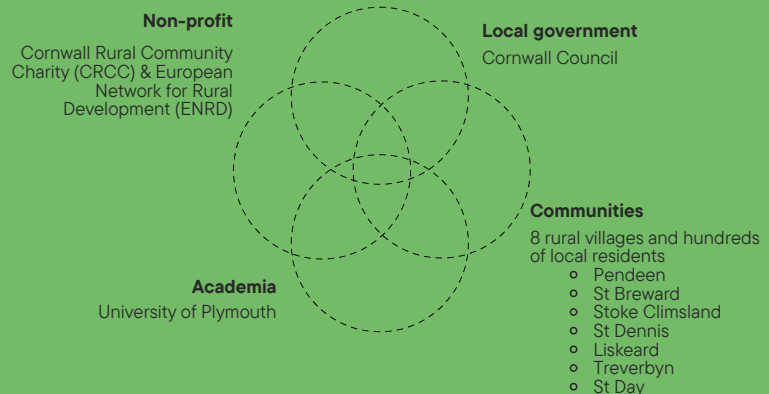
identify opportunities for connecting mediated networks and public spaces to deliver place-based approaches to digital transformation

influence planning and policy for regional ICT access and neighbourhood renewal

LOCAL PARTNERSHIP

Non-profit
Cornwall Rural Community Charity (CRCC) & European Network for Rural Development (ENRD)

Local government
Cornwall Council

Academia
University of Plymouth

Communities
8 rural villages and hundreds of local residents
- Pendeen
- St Breward
- Stoke Climsland
- St Dennis
- Liskeard
- Treverbyn
- St Day
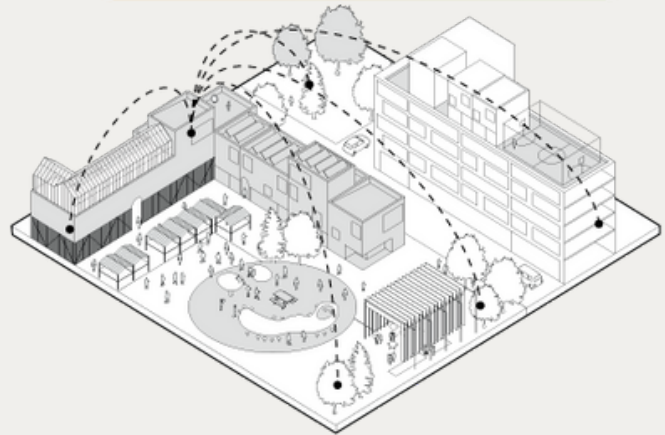
Research involved diary studies, interviews (100 residents in 5 neighbourhoods), focus groups, surveys, and a case study of a village hall that became a Digital Hub.

The 3-stage process focused on:
- **individual behaviours** within digital social networks
- the **role of rural social infrastructures** in providing access, support and sense of place and community
- **engaging with national and EU stakeholders** to share best practices and inform investments in rural digital innovation.

DIGITAL PLACEMAKING
Place-based approaches to digital and social inclusion

Digital (e.g. broadband availability, digital skills, sensors, open data platforms)

Creative (e.g. design approaches, meanwhile use)

Spatial (e.g. village centres, community hubs, green spaces)

Social (e.g. gatekeepers, volunteers, civil society)

PROJECT IMPACTS

DIGITAL SKILL-BUILDING	Supported practical transitions of village halls and community centres from "switched off" to Digital Hubs through a Digital Venue Toolkit, shared with Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) and its 38 member organisations and reach of 52,000 grassroots groups and 213 Parish Councils.
INFRASTRUCTURE	Co-designed new digital infrastructure with rural village residents within the Breward Institute & War Memorial Hall, The Centre of Pendeen community centre, St Dennis (ClayTAWC) and Carnon Downs Village Hall.
POLICY ADVOCACY	Presented two policy briefs to EU Policymakers at EIP-AGRI Seminar, which informed the European Commission DG AGRI strategy 2020-2023.
BUSINESS PRACTICE	Changed business practice of BT and Openreach regarding benefits of digital connectivity for rural communities and the role of digital inclusion in community.

1 Leverage digital placemaking to empower communities to (re-)connect and thrive

The UK's Digital Strategy and Shared Prosperity Fund are primarily based on indicators of local and individual economic benefits of digitalisation, but gloss over potential wider social and community benefits. In rural communities, digital connectivity reinforces community connections and re-embeds distant connections (e.g. relatives who now live abroad or in the city) into village life, contributing to overcoming an urban-rural divide. The importance of digital placemaking for thriving communities has been particularly clear during COVID-19 where social and digital inclusion were big positive contributors towards mental health and well-being in rural communities.

2 Embed digital in social and spatial infrastructures to make it part of the fabric of everyday rural life

Access is only one side of the rural digitalisation challenge. Marginalised communities lack not only hardware or software, but 'access to access' - the social networks and spaces for digital to contribute to individual agency or community action. Digital transformation can only be achieved when digital knowledge and skills become meaningful in people's everyday life. For this, we need to map the supportive organisational (village halls, libraries, community centres) and social infrastructures (community social networks) in place in rural communities and understand how they can be nourished and leveraged to practically access the benefits of new digital infrastructures. For holistic rural development, investments in physical and technological infrastructure must be matched with deliberately rebuilding community assets and social networks.

3 Ensure nobody is "switched off" using Digital Hubs as trusted, community-owned civic infrastructures

Village halls and community centres are key civic infrastructures that can be turned into Digital Hubs to ensure digital connectivity for the many and not just the few. They play a critical role in shaping residents' sense of identity, fostering civic pride and building stronger bonds that encourage people's participation in their community. Village halls are not just a venue to meet but a set of soft community assets – people, skills, knowledge, facilities, and equipment – that form the basis for sustained, trusted and community-owned digital ecosystems. Working with community gatekeepers and empowering local people as Digital Champions is a particularly helpful strategy to reach older people and working-age adults who are furthest away from being digitally included.

4 Design for horizontal collaboration across sectors to deliver on rural digital transformation

The success of the Superfast Cornwall program and Digital Neighbourhoods depended on close collaboration between local residents, telecom/digital service providers, local authorities, and academic institutions. Multidisciplinary local partnerships are key to successfully linking national policies for digitisation to local initiatives and networks and building capacity and co-ownership of rural stakeholders. Open knowledge sharing and horizontal collaboration are primary conditions to designing synergies in these quadruple helix partnerships.

Professor Katharine Willis
Associate Head of School (Research),
School of Art, Design and Architecture
katharine.willis@plymouth.ac.uk

UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH

CORNWALL COUNCIL

crcc supporting cornish communities

European Network for Rural Development

European Union European Regional Development Fund