

Rural co-working: New Network Spaces in the Rural Economy

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Co-investigators:

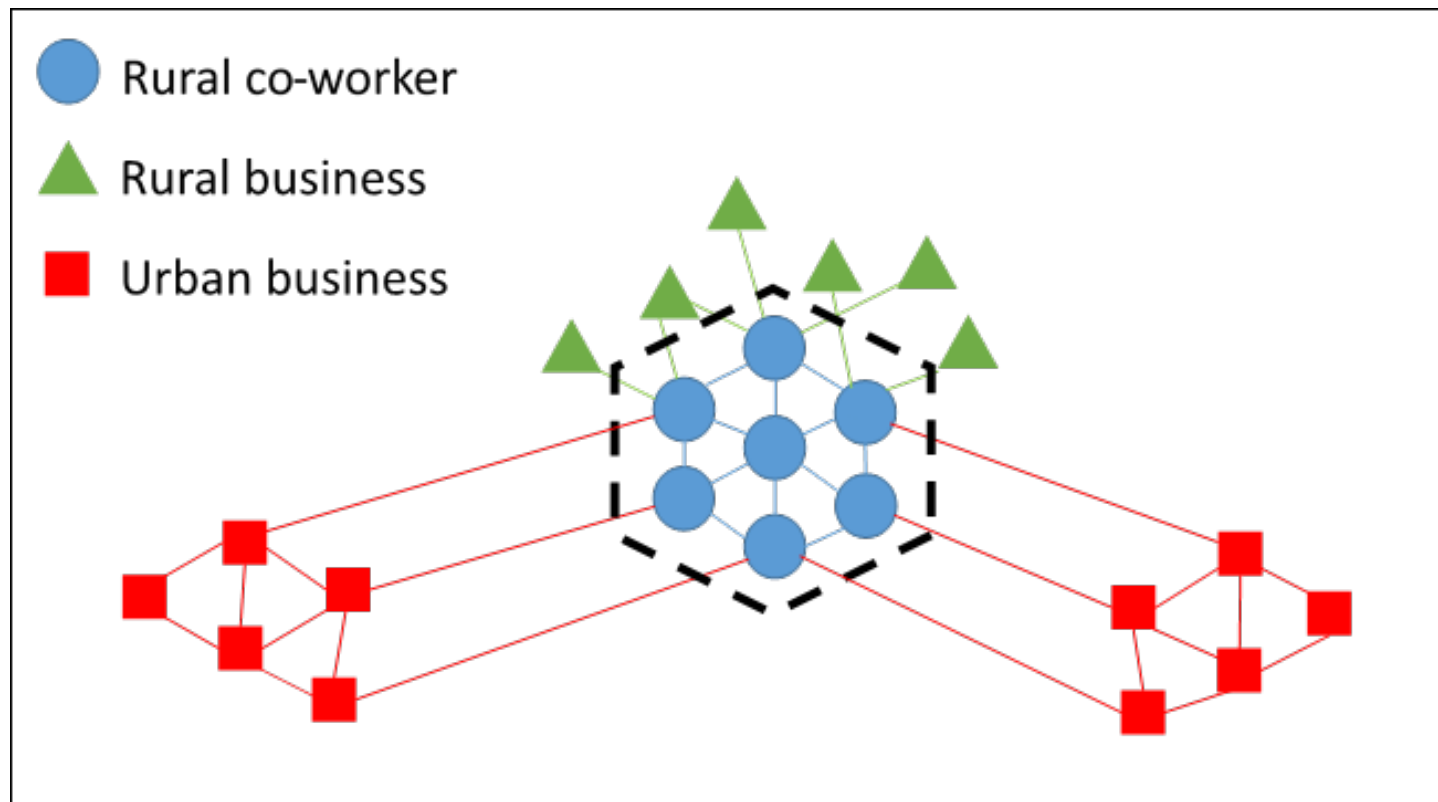
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Aims and Objectives

- Investigate how the development and use of rural co-working spaces influences people's working practices
- Investigate how co-working spaces build and sustain local social networks with the potential to create wider business opportunities
- Assess the impact of rural co-working spaces on community cohesion
- In the light of Covid-19 and environmental pressures making us rethink the length and frequency of work travel, the study will also help to re-conceptualise rural working in the context of a “smart countryside”.

Rural spaces as network nodes

“The irony of framing digitally-enabled co-working spaces as a means for rural society to reconnect around “place” is not lost on us”



Primary research

- 15 interviews completed with operators/founders in the UK, Norway, NZ, Spain, Hungary, Germany and Bulgaria
- Interview with the head of FlexSA
- Participant observation (cut short due to Covid)
- Website analysis of key marketing messages
- Online dissemination and networking in May
- 2 focus groups with rural development policy-makers (Thanks RSN!)



The Big Table in
The Big Room

Left x 2: Workspace Highland, Above: Spithurst Hub,
Above right: Royal Oak, Below: Hexham Enterprise Hub



Ownership/Management	Profit-driven	Public sector (or university-led?)	Community-led (informal, bottom-up/co-ops?)
Goals	Profit from meeting evolving demands of mobile workers	Meet policy goals of delivering training, start-ups, networking etc.	Community cohesion, mutual support, overcome isolation
Audience & Reach	Travellers; “digital nomads”, professional occupations. Potentially global reach	Small businesses, start-ups & homeworkers. Town and hinterland	Homeworkers and self-employed. Local Community
Membership	Annual/day passes, corporate & individual memberships	Annual & monthly passes, short-term tenancies	Informal and low cost
Location	Big cities, transport interchanges – maybe rural hub locations?	Towns (especially those requiring development interventions)	Villages/urban neighbourhoods
Space	Hot-desks, meeting rooms and rentable offices (v. short term)	Incubator, innovation hub with co-working attached	Shared spaces, maybe quite informal
Appearance	Professional (plush/hipster?)	Functional	“cosy” and informal? (variety between communities)
Usage	Occasional & irregular	Mixed	Regular
Technology provision	Professional & comprehensive	Access to technology that you may not have at home/office	“Sufficient” (but adhoc – corporate IT for larger firms may question it – security?)
Other services	Café, meeting rooms etc; reception, digital office	Training, serviced offices, reception networking events	Quite limited – dependent on venue

Critical success factors

- Location and accessibility (inc. car parking)
 - Technology
 - Design & layout of the space
 - Membership options
 - Identity of the /community
 - Create opportunities for collaboration
 - Offer training and business support
- Planning & design
- Community-led

“You can’t build an Innovation Centre, but you can create a space where people can meet and talk informally”

Implications for local development

- Traditionally co-working is part of from a innovative, urban entrepreneurial ecosystem that facilitates wider participation in the cluster.
- Attention is shifting from the towering dominance of London to smaller urban hubs and especially commuting towns. <https://digit-research.org/co-working-spaces-and-the-urban-ecosystem/>
- **But will this just be a smaller version of big-city co-working or something new?**
- Part of the need for many rural operators, and supporters, will be to educate people about coworking and raise awareness of the opportunities.

*“The decision to start a rural hub really came from part of our purpose which is to **improve the connections** between rural and urban entrepreneurs to see some of their **learning spread a little bit further** than just within the city”*

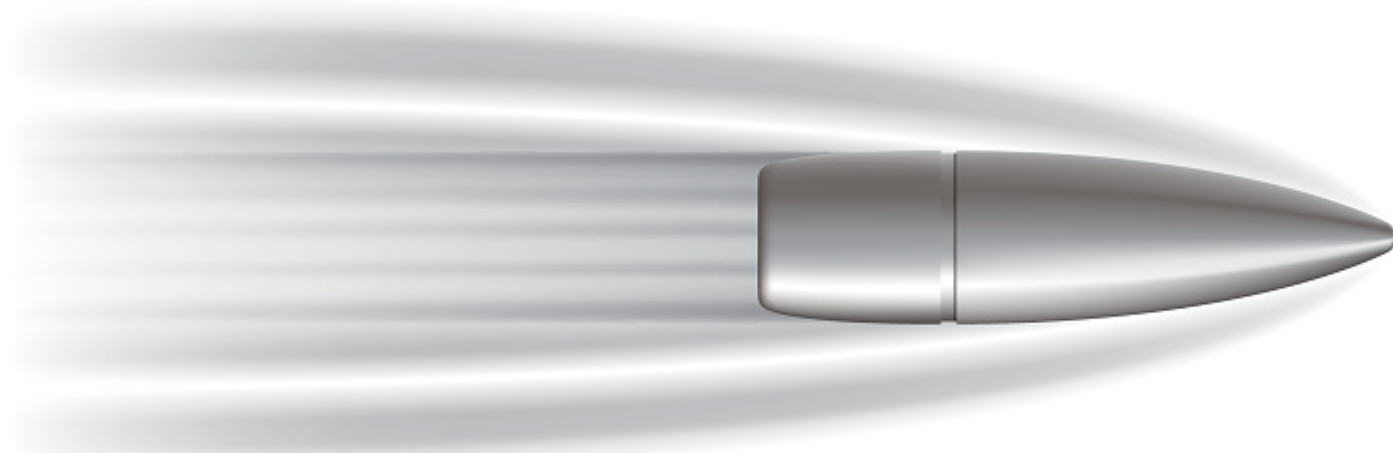
Implications for rural development

- Rural sites are more idiosyncratic creating a more fragmented sector
- Operators tap into distinctive local characteristics and assets

“I would say we are kind of really focused on this local community on the needs of local community. Every rural community is different and has different needs”

“We actively try and do stuff outside of our four walls ... it’s a big part of what we do”

- Digital connectivity is still a major attractor of users, but so too are community-building, wellbeing and collective support
- This diversity can spark new networks and entrepreneurial ideas but it might also widen inequalities between rural areas – *coworking will thrive in entrepreneurial places, but may not transform places that lack entrepreneurial resources*



Some conclusions

- Rural and small-town coworking communities will become increasingly important network nodes if remote working perpetuates
- Coworking can form part of a multi-purpose rural hub, linking to transport and other services. This could support High Street regeneration of smaller towns too.
- Rural economies can benefit most if coworking connects **within and beyond** local communities – creating new entrepreneurial opportunities and supporting flexible working

BUT

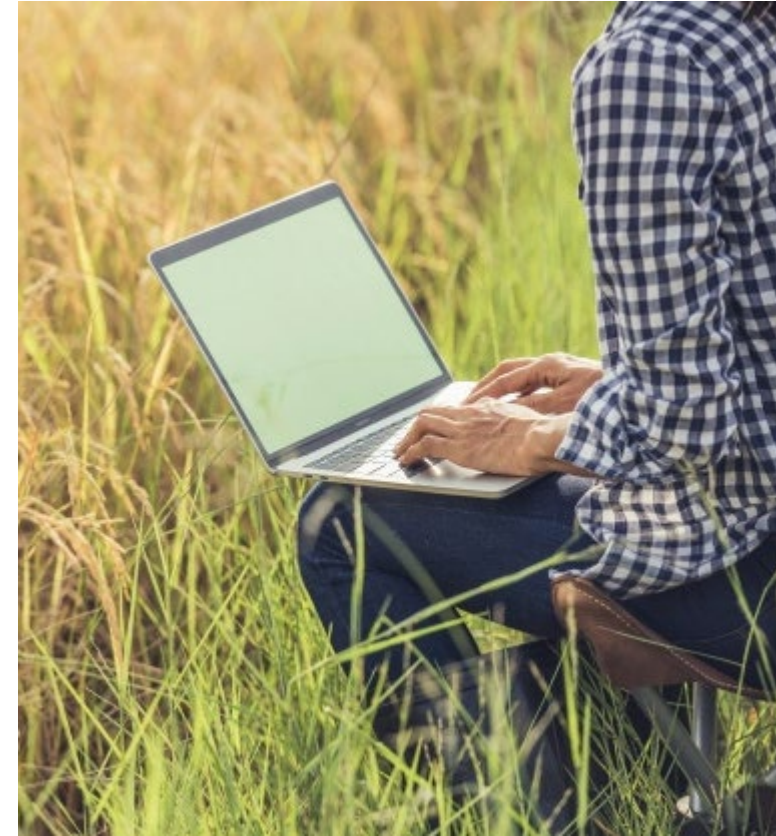
- Not all professions will be able to participate and not all individuals will have the skills and confidence to engage so infrastructure and digital training are essential for coworking to support the levelling-up agenda
- Rural coworking cannot replicate the scale, buzz and agglomeration of urban centres; so the goals and values of rural coworking spaces must be context-specific. This may require different indicators of success and different financial models that recognise non-economic values too.

Thank You!

Any questions or comments?

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