



Commission for Rural Communities

Tackling rural disadvantage

Rural Proofing Report 2004-2005

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For supplemental material, Full departmental returns, the Rural Services Review and other background material to the Rural Proofing Monitoring report can be found at:
www.countryside.gov.uk/EssentialServices/ruralProofing/index.asp or
www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

Foreword

Almost ten million people live in the communities of rural England and in many ways it is their diversity that stands out most of all. Yet underneath this diversity lie some common challenges for rural service and policy delivery. Small rural settlements and relatively large distances between rural communities inevitably affect the way people live their lives and how local economies operate.

Government policies - from strategies and new initiatives, to regulation and the setting of delivery targets - must be adaptable to that reality if they are to operate successfully in rural areas and bring benefit to rural people, businesses and communities. I know from my regular meetings with rural communities, that often they feel policies, however well intentioned, are not working for them. This can be particularly felt by those who are most disadvantaged. That is why I attach such importance to rural proofing - to ensure that rural needs are adequately considered and are not simply seen as an afterthought or, worse, overlooked altogether.

Ensuring that rural proofing is taken seriously across government and beyond government will be right at the heart of the work of the new Commission for Rural Communities, in its role as an independent rural watchdog.

Consequently, I am pleased to introduce this year's Rural Proofing report. It shows that government, particularly at the national level, has continued to make efforts to embed rural proofing into its policy making. Significantly, both the Cabinet Office and Treasury have built rural proofing into some key machinery of government processes during the last year.

However, the success of rural proofing will not be judged by reference to policy processes alone: rural communities will rightly want to know what difference it has made to their quality of life. There are certainly examples of positive and tangible benefits, though some policies still slip through the net and some of these may cause real difficulties for rural communities.

In my view rural proofing has now reached the end of its first stage of development. It has spread widely and matured during its first four years. But for all its successes, it does not yet deliver everything we, or rural communities would wish it to. The key challenge now is how best to develop it further and where to focus effort to make a difference. As Rural Advocate that is a challenge to which I will personally commit and I will welcome your support and ideas in doing so.

Stuart Burgess

(Chairman of the Countryside Agency and Rural Advocate)

Executive Summary

Introduction

Rural proofing is a commitment by Government to ensure that all its domestic policies take account of rural circumstances and needs¹. It is a mandatory part of the policy process, which means that, as policies are developed, policy makers should systematically:

- consider whether their policy is likely to have a different impact in rural areas, because of particular rural circumstances or needs;
- make proper assessment of those impacts, if these are likely to be significant;
- adjust the policy, where appropriate, with solutions to meet rural needs and circumstances.

Rural proofing applies to all policies, programmes and initiatives and it applies to both design and delivery stages.

The Government is committed to making rural proofing a reality at national and regional levels. The Rural White Paper [Defra, 2000] gave the Countryside Agency the role of monitoring and reporting on performance in rural proofing and, in future, as part of its wider role as an independent rural watchdog, the Commission for Rural Communities will have the responsibility for monitoring the extent to which Government is delivering this commitment.

Within the Rural White Paper, Government also introduced the Rural Services Standard, which set out for the first time the kind of access to a range of key services that people living in the countryside could expect. Since then, the Countryside Agency has reported separately each year on progress against targets within the Standard. This report brings together an assessment of rural proofing delivery during 2004/05 and progress of the Rural Services Standard over the same period.

Context

The Commission's State of the Countryside 2005 report, published in July, describes in detail the diverse nature of rural England and the continuing changes in rural communities. In particular the report demonstrated some notable differences in the social and economic condition of the different types of rural areas – showing, for example, that the more sparse rural areas do have lower household incomes than equivalent households in the more populated rural areas.

The Government is increasingly devolving public service priority setting and delivery to bodies operating at regional and local levels and this applies in rural areas as elsewhere. This means that responsibility for policy and delivery may rest with a range of different bodies.

¹. As set out in the Rural White Paper, 2000

The process of rural proofing

There has been progress in establishing rural proofing within the central process of government. The Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA)² now includes a rural checklist and the Treasury now requires all departments to rural proof their budget assessments and to ensure that all Public Services Agreements (PSAs) can only be met if they are implemented in both urban and rural communities. This embedding of rural proofing may be stronger at national level than at regional and local levels where progress is more mixed.

At the same time, the European Union (EU) is the source of over half of the United Kingdom's legislation. Our analysis indicates that RIA processes for the development and delivery of EU directives and regulation do provide the framework within which specific rural proofing checks could be placed.

The impact of rural proofing

We cannot yet provide a comprehensive picture of the overall impact of rural proofing - due, in part, to the in-built delay between most policy development and implementation. We have however identified a number of cases where rural proofing is having a positive impact, for example in the Countryside Communities programme of the Big Lottery Fund. However, there are other cases, such as the Sustainable Communities Plan, where we have concerns about the extent to which the real needs and circumstances of rural people's lives have been recognised. For example, limited 'sustainability' criteria - typically travel distances and a checklist on the availability of services - are frequently used to restrict housing and employment development in rural settlements, thereby undermining the social and economic viability of rural communities.

Rural Services Standard

Rural Services Standard targets have been met in the delivery of a number of services and programmes, including postal services, emergency services response times and public transport. However, there is a risk to the integrity of the national Standard in the increasing devolution of public service target-setting to the regional and local level. Also, it is still not possible to assess the achievement of some of the service standards, because of the lack of detailed information on specific rural measures; for example on schools with broadband connectivity or on the levels of healthcare choice.

The way forward

There remain a number of areas where both rural proofing and the Rural Services Standard can be incrementally developed to the benefit of England's rural communities. At the same time, there is also a need for more significant steps forward. Rural proofing needs to start to address core issues of funding and resource allocation. Both rural proofing and the Rural Services Standard need to take on the challenge of increased localisation of policy and delivery. Both processes also need to develop much stronger means by which the experiences and concerns of rural people can inform monitoring work and hence influence change.

². This is a policy tool to ensure that the socio-economic and environmental needs are assessed when government policy is being developed



Introduction

Rural proofing

Rural proofing by Government was introduced formally in the Rural White Paper (Defra, 2000) and is a process intended to ensure that, as policy is developed and implemented, government (and other key social and economic actors):

- consider whether their policy is likely to have a different impact in rural areas, because of particular rural circumstances or needs;
- make proper assessment of those impacts, if these are likely to be significant;
- adjust the policy, where appropriate, with solutions to meet rural needs and circumstances.

The Government is committed to making rural proofing a reality – at national and regional levels. To deliver this commitment:

- Government departments have been charged with the responsibility for undertaking and embedding rural proofing;
- Defra has the role of promoting rural proofing to government departments, Government Offices for the Regions and public delivery agencies;
- The Countryside Agency and, in future the Commission for Rural Communities, has the responsibility for monitoring and reporting on the progress of government departments as they seek to embed rural objectives in policy making and delivery; to provide advice and encouragement to Defra and others; and to identify good practice and innovation and to encourage rural proofing to be taken up more widely.

Rural Services Standard

The Rural Services Standard, also introduced in the Rural White Paper, is intended to ensure fair access to public services for people living in rural areas. Set by Defra and revised each year in consultation with relevant government departments, it contains standards for key public services set at national level; setting out for example, how long it should take to see a GP and targets for ambulance response times.

A review of the Rural Services Standard, carried out in 2003 by Defra and assisted by the Countryside Agency, resulted in the production of the Rural Services Review, *Reviewing Standards 2004*, published in November last year. Now more accessible and user friendly, it contains the Rural Services Standard illustrated by case studies which show what the standards mean for rural people and what can be done locally to meet them.

As with rural proofing, the Commission for Rural Communities has the responsibility for monitoring and reporting on the extent to which the Rural Services Standard is being met.

The Commission for Rural Communities

The Government's Rural Strategy, published by Defra in July 2004, set out proposals for changes to rural delivery arrangements in the future. As part of these changes, the Commission for Rural Communities is to be established as an independent non-departmental public body with three specific roles:

- rural advocate: the voice for rural people, businesses and communities, especially those suffering from disadvantage;
- expert adviser: providing evidence-based, objective advice to government and others;
- independent watchdog: monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

The watchdog role specifically requires the Commission to 'monitor rural-proofing of mainstream policies and progress in the delivery of the Government's rural policies, including through its contacts at regional and local level and to report on achievement on the ground, especially in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion'.³

Pending legislation, the Commission has been established as an operating division of the Countryside Agency.

The rural proofing report

This is the fourth report on rural proofing, since the process was adopted in the Rural White Paper. This report summarises evidence from across government about rural proofing activity in the year 2004 / 2005. It also contains the annual progress report on the Rural Services Standard for 2004/05, previously published as a stand-alone report.

In assessing this evidence, this report sets out to:

- provide a clear and independent view of the successes and failures of rural proofing to date⁴;
- present an assessment of the progress on the Rural Services Standard;
- seek to provide leadership in recommending the way forward for rural proofing.

³.Defra, 2004 Rural Strategy 2004 Fact Sheet: New Countryside Agency. Defra: London

⁴.This is both the success/failure of the process and impacts of Rural Proofing; although the impacts are harder to monitor, and have a longer lead-time. For rural proofing to be successful these impacts must be measured.

2

Context

The rural context

The Commission's State of the Countryside 2005 report, published in July, describes in detail the social, economic and environmental condition of rural England. It highlights the different circumstances across the different types of rural areas, presenting the first broad use of the new rural and urban definition. The report describes the ongoing migration of people from urban to rural areas (currently of the order of 100,000 per annum). It also highlights the variations between the different types of rural areas – for example, showing:

- that the more sparse rural areas fare less well on specific economic indicators (household income, employment) than their counterparts in the more populated rural areas;
- that the smallest settlements across rural England tend to fare better on a range of social indicators (crime, educational results) than larger rural towns.

The report also explored some elements of disadvantage across rural England, indicating that, even in the most prosperous rural category, around one household in six had a household income of less than £15,000 per annum.

The policy context

The legislative programme for 2004/2005 is presented in Annex 1. This reflects the Government's focus on key themes, such as:

- modernisation of public services;
- improving quality and choice in education;
- greater support for working families and improved maternity benefits;
- continued reform of the health service and the welfare state.

In parallel with continuing change across rural England, Government is also changing the ways in which it seeks to meet the needs of the 9.5 million people who live there. As signalled by its Rural Strategy (2004), Defra has initiated increasing devolution of rural priority setting and delivery to the regional (and local) levels of government. This report covers the period 2004/2005 just prior to the re-allocation of some responsibilities from the Countryside Agency to Regional Development Agencies and to Government Offices in the Regions.

Defra's strategy (currently being implemented through the Department's Modernising Rural Delivery (MRD) programme) is part of a wider picture across government. We see an increasing focus of central departments on making strategic decisions, on putting in place the policy framework and on agreeing targets. Delivery is often devolved to other parts of government or to agencies operating at a regional or local level.

3

The process of rural proofing

Introduction

This chapter assesses the extent to which rural proofing has become embedded in the processes of government at a range of different levels, identifying where there has been progress and where further work is required.

The current state of play

National level

Annex 2 summarises evidence of rural proofing activity provided by central government departments.

The overall picture is one of steady progress, as individual departments increasingly embed rural proofing processes into their work.

Perhaps of greatest significance are the important steps that have been taken to embed rural proofing within key processes within central government, because these then ensure that there is a system, with checks and balances, which encourages government departments to incorporate rural proofing.

First, the Cabinet Office continues to demonstrate commitment to rural proofing policy. Rural proofing has been further integrated into the RIA process to improve understanding about the importance of rural proofing. The RIA is mandatory for all policy makers, so incorporation of the rural proofing checklist should mean that rural issues are considered as an integral part of policy development across all departments. Cabinet Office worked with Defra to draft new RIA guidance, making the need for rural proofing more explicit. The guidance is widely used across government, helping to ensure that the consequences of policies for rural communities are considered by a large number of policy officials.

For example, the Department of Health is using the guidance to develop RIAs that consider fully the impact of policies on rural areas (including those on NHS Pharmaceutical Regulations 2005, the Green Paper 'Independence, Well-being, and Choice: Our Vision for the future for Social Care for Adults in England 2005' and the National Service Framework for Renal Services).

In 2004, the Countryside Agency produced further guidance on the importance of rural proofing and why it needed to be considered as part of an RIA⁵.

Second, the Treasury (HMT), within the usual Spending Review processes, now requires all departments to rural proof their Spending Review Submissions and to ensure that all Public Services Agreements (PSAs) can only be met, if they are implemented in both urban and rural communities⁶. It will be particularly important that similar requirements and measures are built into the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review. We would want to see rural proofing fully embedded within the CSR guidelines when these are published.

⁵.See <http://www.countryside.gov.uk/EssentialServices/ruralProofing/RIARI/index.asp>

⁶.If met in 7 out of 9 service areas as specified in PSA4 technical note

These developments are welcome (and essential). However, as shown in Annex 1, there remain gaps in the evidence about the extent to which rural proofing has been applied to the legislative programme and to a number of the Government's Bills over 2004/05. Evidence of rural proofing was not presented for the majority of these and this lack of transparency makes it harder to monitor.

Regional level ⁷

Across the eight English regions (excluding London) the responsibility for promoting rural proofing, and for ensuring it happens, lies with the Government Offices for the Regions (GORs). Annex 3 summarises evidence from the GORs on rural proofing activity at the regional level. This evidence indicates that there is a broad range of rural proofing activity across the eight Regions with, as would be expected, variations in the approaches that have been adopted.

However, more work remains to be done; for example, the Government Office for the West Midlands has highlighted the need for GORs to be involved in new initiatives at an earlier stage, in order to maximise their input. The view of GOWM is that the main barriers to successful rural proofing remain:

- the lack of effort by departments to involve GORs at an early stage of developing new initiatives or activities;
- the lack of joining up of programme work by departments, resulting in disjointed activity and, in the example of ChangeUp in the West Midlands, shortened timeframes for rural consortia to apply for all the funding available;
- agencies still producing best practice guides without referral to the GO, who then remain unable to discuss findings with departments.

In general we believe that there may be a need for some further clarification of the roles (and the resourcing) of rural proofing at the regional level; in particular with regard to the key regional strategic documents including Spatial, Housing and Economic Strategies.

⁷.More detailed examples included in Annex 3

Local government

There is no current policy requiring that rural proofing should be carried out at a local government level. Nevertheless, a number of local authorities do have processes to ensure consideration of rural needs in relation to their Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), Best Value, local PSA and scrutiny processes. This is part of an incremental process: the Countryside Agency/LGA report published in May 2004, 'Think Rural', which surveyed local authorities' knowledge and application of rural proofing, was used throughout the year to help reinforce local authority rural proofing. This report builds on the LGA's 'Achieving Rural Revival' (2004), which recommended that local authorities should develop their rural proofing agenda.

Future progress in this area may be encouraged by the work of the Audit Commission, which has developed recognition of rural issues within the methodology and guidance for its CPA process. In 2004-5, the Countryside Agency worked with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) on an appraisal tool for rural proofing the shared priorities agreed between central and local government. The report (June 2005, www.solace.org.uk/) has been well received and provides a framework to help local authorities consider rural issues systematically across all their activities.

To date, however, few local authorities are applying rural proofing in a systematic way and there remains a need for better mechanisms to be in place for identifying and sharing best practice at this level. There exists the opportunity to use mechanisms, such as Beacon Councils' mentoring programmes, to provide a platform to assist further and better rural proofing at the local authority level.

International

As part of our role to identify good practice and to learn lessons from elsewhere, we looked at what, if any, rural proofing arrangements existed elsewhere in Europe. The EU is the source of over half of the UK's legislation and, therefore, has an important impact on rural communities and businesses. Our analysis into how the rural dimension was considered within processes for the development and delivery of EU directives and regulation indicated that:

- there is no specific EU equivalent of rural proofing;
- however, current (social, economic and environmental) impact assessment processes could provide the framework within which specific rural proofing checks could be placed.

This work also indicated that specific rural proofing processes were not found in the other European countries assessed (Sweden and France). A broader assessment of approaches in other countries (see Annex 4) indicates that none has adopted approaches as comprehensive as those now in place within England. In most countries, rural communities rely on political lobbying to ensure their concerns are addressed.

Overall assessment

The concept of rural proofing is steadily being embedded into the processes by which policy is formulated across government, in particular at the national level. This welcome trend has been encouraged by positive support from the Treasury and from the Cabinet Office. There have also been some useful developments at regional and local level. However, it is still difficult to trace specific outcomes on the ground from the process, which, in our view, is partly due to the time delay between the formulation of policy and its implementation locally and also the different delivery mechanisms that now exist, so that those who are responsible for the policy framework are divorced from those who implement the delivery.

This overall good progress needs to be sustained, in particular rural proofing faces two key challenges.

Devolution of decision-making and delivery

The general trend across government for the devolution of policy (and to a greater extent) delivery to the regional and local levels offers more localised input to decision-making, which, on the one hand, should increase the extent to which rural needs and circumstances are recognised and taken into account.

However the process of moving to new structures, the consequent involvement of a larger number of players (leading to a more complex co-ordination task) and the smaller size of some of these organisations may (in some cases) result in a gap developing between the recognitions of rurality within national policy frameworks and the way in which policy is delivered locally by organisations such as Regional Development Agencies and Primary Care Trusts.

Data

Successful rural proofing relies (in part) on a robust evidence base that allows the precise nature of rural circumstances, needs and outcomes to be understood. The new rural definition, alongside developments in data collection (such as the increasing availability of postcoded datasets), will provide a tool to help analyse the social and economic characteristics of rural areas at a more local scale than has been possible before – and so help to pinpoint areas of greatest need. The definition can be used to attach a 'data marker'⁸ to government statistics, so as to provide much better evidence of trends in a wide range of services. In some areas we have seen important progress, especially in the Department for Education and Skills (DfES); in others, such as DH, less so.

⁸. "Rural tagging"

Recommendations

- (i) HMT should build on current commitments, such as in the Spending Review or PSAs, and require rural proofing for all submissions and subsequent spending plans within the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review.
- (ii) When devolving national responsibilities for regional and local delivery, government departments should ensure that rural proofing is a clear distinct element within the contracts and compacts drawn up with delivery agencies.

4

The impact of rural proofing

Introduction

The process of rural proofing is important but the real test of the policy is whether it delivers clear and beneficial impacts for rural people and businesses.

Overall assessment

It is still not possible to construct a comprehensive picture of the overall impact of rural proofing, partly, as we said earlier, because of the inbuilt delay between policy-making and implementation and, partly, because of the issues of traceability and, increasingly, accountability. However, we can identify a range of examples which demonstrate the impacts of rural proofing.

Recent positive impacts:

- The Countryside Communities' initiative by the Big Lottery Fund aims to get fair levels of Lottery money into disadvantaged rural areas. It is a £16.2 million initiative (over five years), channeling resources into eight rural districts and 300 villages within them. This programme targets deprived rural areas using a more rurally sensitive approach rather than simply relying on standard indices of deprivation. During 2004/05, this initiative provided funding, advice and support to community and voluntary groups for a wide range of projects benefiting deprived rural communities. In addition, the initiative has led to a joint £3 million three-year Rural Action Research programme between the Big Lottery Fund and the Carnegie UK Trust. This will help create a strong evidence base on rural policy development, leading to recommendations to government and others.
- The Home Office's Change Up Framework and Investment Programme: This aims 'to make a step change in the support available to frontline voluntary and community organisations to help them achieve their aims'. Defra, the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) and Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE), as well as the Countryside Agency, have all been involved in developing aspects of this programme, so that it recognises rural circumstances and needs. The investment criteria include action to address the needs of rural organisations and guidance on how to rural proof proposals.
- Futurebuilders: Also a Home Office (HO) programme, for improving capacity among voluntary groups, has established distinct rural targets (which it is currently exceeding).
- Planning guidance: Rural proofing has resulted in revisions to the guidance within Planning Policy Statement 1 (PPS1), Planning Policy Statement 3 (PPS3), Planning Policy Statement 7 (PPS7), produced by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM).
- Broadband: (Department for Trade and Industry). A sparsity weighting, based on relative population densities, is included in the broadband grant. This is a more accurate and equitable means to ensure rural areas have the additional funding required.

At a regional level, examples include:

- Rural transport – The Government Office for the East of England (GO-East) published the draft Regional Transport Strategy in December 2004. Inevitably, it reflects intent at this stage, rather than delivery, but it focuses on rural issues, identifying transport and wider social concerns that have a bearing on the access needs of rural communities. The GO-East Transport Team, represented directly on the Transport Task Group, undertook rural proofing of the strategy. Work is now ongoing in rural proofing the Local Transport Plans (LTPs) that are being developed by local authorities for the period 2006-2011. These LTPs are required to include a framework accessibility strategy that will, inter alia, enable the accessibility needs of people living and working in rural areas to be identified.
- Children and Young People - In the Government Office for the South West (GOSW) Youth Hubs have been developed which extend the range of activities young people in rural areas can access within a safe environment (the Rollercoaster in Sydenham is Somerset's first pilot Youth Hub). There is now a rural protocol between Somerset Youth Services, Connexions and Somerset Youth Partnership for the delivery of youth services to rural communities.

Developments on programmes / initiatives referenced in previous rural proofing reports

- Department for Education and Skills (DfES). In addition to Sure Start Local Programmes, other policies that have been rural proofed include the development of extended schools. Funding has been available since 2003-4, initially to the most disadvantaged urban and rural areas, but from 2005-6 all local education authorities will be receiving funding to support the delivery of extended services in all schools over time.
- Department of Constitutional Affairs (DCA). Concerns raised through rural proofing persuaded the Magistrates' Courts Committees to retain the courthouse at Minehead, Somerset. In the West Mercia area, several rural courts were threatened with closure, but the application of rural proofing to an accommodation review led to the retention of courthouses at Oswestry, Ludlow and Market Drayton.
- Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). To extend library services to rural users, DCMS has piloted 'Wi-Fi' services in ten small rural libraries to improve access to services through the People's Network. The Arts Council England have undertaken a major rural proofing exercise and a first step is to change its monitoring procedures to obtain better information on the reach of its funding into rural areas. The Creative Partnerships programme, which encourages professional artists to work with communities and schools, is targeting areas of rural deprivation. WebPlayUK creates a link between children in rural and urban areas through virtual drama. In the first year schools in Birmingham and Shropshire took part.

Areas of concern Sustainable Communities Plan (ODPM, 2003)

This national strategic plan (now in the process of being implemented) aims to focus future development, particularly housing development, in ways that lead to prosperous and sustainable communities in the future. However concerns remain about the initial rural proofing of the plan and of the ongoing implementation activity - as investment is being focussed in a relatively small number of growth areas (in the South) and regeneration/market renewal areas (in the North). The particular needs of many rural communities for additional affordable housing are comparatively neglected. A further, and linked, concern of rural communities is the extent to which the new planning systems, introduced by the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, properly take account of community concerns in the integration of planning documents.⁹

Funding

Most of the rural proofing evidence submitted by government departments this year does not address issues related to the allocation of core funding – for example to local authorities. Yet, work carried out previously by the Countryside Agency [Developing Indicators of the Effect of Geodemographic Factors on Cost and Performance of Public Services, Secta for the Countryside Agency (2004)]¹⁰ indicates that there is a need to address the fairness of the allocation of funding to local authorities to recognise the costs and difficulties of service delivery in rural areas. Given the importance of decisions on funding to public service delivery across rural England, this is an area where rural proofing needs to have more impact.

⁹.To achieve this we would advocate practical mechanisms by which the relevant policies and proposals contained within parish plans and village design statements (VDSs) can be taken on board in the appropriate documents within Local Development Frameworks (LDFs).

Currently the status of Parish Plans and VDSs is unclear. This needs to be addressed to ensure the new planning framework operates on a genuinely consultative basis and addresses the needs of local rural communities

¹⁰.see link from this webpage:

http://www.countryside.gov.uk/VitalVillages/Local_Governance/index.asp#

5

Rural Services Standard

Introduction

The Rural White Paper (2000) included a commitment to developing and maintaining the Rural Services Standard. The purpose of the Standard was to give rural people a clear understanding of the sort of access to services they could expect. The Standard currently includes 11 key services, which cover education, health and social care, broadband, postal services and emergency services. They are revised each year by Defra, in consultation with relevant government departments, and monitored annually by the Commission for Rural Communities (formerly the Countryside Agency). The Countryside Agency has produced three separate stand-alone progress reports on the Rural Services Standard, published in July each year since 2001-02.

A review of the Rural Services Standard, carried out in 2003 by Defra and assisted by the Countryside Agency, resulted in the production of Rural Services Review, Reviewing Standards, 2004, published in November last year. It contains the Rural Services Standard but is illustrated by case studies showing what individuals, communities and local government can do to overcome barriers and deliver services to these national standards. Following this, it was agreed that the Rural Services Standard progress report should be included in the Commission for Rural Communities' annual rural proofing report.

This new format was evaluated in early 2005 to identify whether the new style provided clearer information on access to public services that rural communities can expect; whether it was successful in reaching its target audience; and the strengths and weaknesses of the new approach. The Rural Services Review was seen as a good overall source of information about how rural services standards can and do affect the lives of people who live in rural areas. Defra and the Commission need to act on its recommendations to raise awareness of both the Review and the Rural Services Standard.

The current state of play

A detailed report on the progress against the Standard is presented in Annex 5.

The headline results are:

Extended schools

DfES have not yet carried out any formal monitoring exercises or audit to measure the number of schools in England that are providing extended services in rural areas or in general, yet there is a commitment for half of all primary schools and a third of all secondary schools to offer extended services by 2008. We are concerned that rural schools should not lag behind urban areas in the development of extended services, since our research shows that some local authorities are not addressing specific rural needs and circumstances in an integrated way.¹¹

Sure Start

The targets for establishment of Sure Start Centres in disadvantaged areas are expected to be met by the deadline of March 2006.

¹¹DfES carried out a baseline study in January 2005 measuring extended services in schools; stratified by urban/rural, but it was not full audit of rural provision. (See: www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/rr681.pdf)

School closures

The presumption against school closures has been maintained and reinforced with fresh advice from DfES (October, 2004). Nine rural schools closed in 2004-5 compared to 11 in 2003-4.

Social care

Since 1998, the number of households receiving intensive homecare in England has risen by 43 per cent, with 662,000 people aged 65 and over being helped to live at home in March 2004. Unfortunately, there is no rural cut of this data.

Broadband

The target for provision of broadband services to all schools is expected to be met by the deadline of 2006.

Postal services

The requirement to maintain the rural network of post offices has been extended until March 2008. However, the requirement to prevent any avoidable closures ceases in March 2006. We are concerned that this could lead to post offices closing in an unplanned way, leading to gaps in provision of postal services. 97 rural post offices closed in 2004-5, a similar level to other recent years.

Hospital appointments and choice

Nationally, 94.7 per cent of inpatient admissions were booked and 84.9 per cent of outpatients' appointments were booked. No information is currently available on the extent to which targets on hospital appointments booking and on healthcare provider choice are being met for rural people.

Primary care / General Practitioner appointments

Virtually all patients (rural and urban) are seen within the target wait-times.

Internet access

Figures for 2003-4 show that 49 per cent of households in England have access to the Internet via a personal computer.

Emergency Service response

The percentage of rural Ambulance Trusts meeting the target to respond to 75 per cent of immediately life threatening calls within 8 minutes has improved steadily from 8.3 per cent in 2000-1 to 86.9 per cent in 2004-5.

Transport

The target for the proportion of the rural population living within 10 minutes walk of an hourly or better bus service to increase to 50 percent by 2010 has already been met.

Overall assessment

The Rural Services Standard represented a major commitment and, potentially, an important step forward for rural people in seeking to ensure fair access to services. However, as with rural proofing, the Standard faces key challenges.

(i) Devolution

Increasingly, targets are set at regional and local level. Whilst this provides the opportunity to adjust targets to take account of local needs and circumstances, there is a risk that national standards set to benefit rural communities become diluted.

(ii) Data

In many areas, the Standard is currently unable to do its job, because of the lack of detailed information on specific rural measures, for example on schools with broadband connectivity or on the levels of healthcare choice.

iii) Effectiveness

Is the Standard sufficiently measuring services from the perspective of rural consumers, rather than from the perspective of government departments?

Recommendations

(i) DfES should audit the existing and planned provision of extended schools to ensure that rural needs are being met.

(ii) Dti should maintain the commitment to prevent any avoidable closures of rural post offices, which lapses in March 2006, until a strategy for the future of the rural network has been developed and consulted upon.

(iii) Defra should take further action to encourage other government departments to meet their commitments to ensuring 'rural tagging' of their data.

6

The way forward

Both rural proofing and the Rural Services Standard represent significant commitments by government to rural people and communities. Five years after the Rural White Paper, we can see that these commitments have led to positive change and further value can be gained from ongoing incremental change.

However, for both of these initiatives, there is a sense in which we have reached the end of the first chapter and that, in order to continue to deliver their full promise, both need re-invigorating.

The Rural Services Standard should, potentially, be an important step forward for rural people in seeking to ensure fair access to services. To perform this function, the collection of rural data needs to improve and the Commission plans to continue its work in this field with Defra's help in "rural tagging" data. Also, national standards set to benefit rural communities need to be continued at a regional and local level.

With regard to rural proofing, we welcome the refresh which Defra are currently carrying out across government (at national and regional levels) of the way in which rural proofing is undertaken and whether further changes are required to increase its effectiveness.

There are, we believe, some central themes for the next steps forward.

Funding: From work by the Commission and others (for example on local government funding), we believe that there are serious challenges to be made about the way funds are allocated to rural areas. However, to date, both rural proofing and the Rural Services Standard have tended to focus on issues of process and detail and neither has yet radically challenged the basic assumptions and formulae by which government funds are distributed.

Engagement: To date rural proofing has been an exercise within, and for, government. Hence, to date, the monitoring of rural proofing has involved government department reporting on their own progress. In the next phase of this work, we need to find ways to ensure that the experiences and concerns of rural people are captured and are fed back to trigger change. At Regional level, we see the Regional Rural Affairs Forums (RRAFs) as playing a key role in making this happen. We also need to ensure that the basic processes for rural proofing are grounded in the practical experiences of those engaged in developing and delivering policy across the different levels of government.

In building on, and adding to, these ideas, the Commission plans to seek the views of interested organisations and groups who represent rural people. In so doing, we want to ensure that both rural proofing and the Rural Services Standard build from the current work and that they make an increasingly significant impact on the lives of rural people across England.

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Summary of recommendations

Recommendations

Central government

HMT should build on current commitments, such as in the Spending Review or PSAs, and require rural proofing for all submissions and subsequent spending plans within the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review.

DfES should audit the existing and planned provision of extended schools to ensure that rural needs are being met.

Dti should maintain the commitment to prevent any avoidable rural post office closures, which lapses in March 2006, until a strategy for the future of the rural network has been developed and consulted upon.

Defra should take further action to encourage other government departments to meet their commitments to ensuring 'rural tagging' of their data.

Regional government & delivery agencies

When devolving national responsibilities for regional and local delivery, government departments should ensure that rural proofing is a clear distinct element within the contracts and compacts drawn up with delivery agencies..

Annex one: Rural proofing of bills through parliament 2004/2005

List of Government bills in England that were presented during the rural proofing reporting year 01/04/04 to 31/03/05

Cells that are shaded grey contain bills that were withdrawn or dropped. Draft bills are listed at the end.

Name of Bill	Date Presented
Animal welfare Bill	14/07/04
Charities Bill	20/12/04
Child Benefit Bill	13/12/04
Clean Neighbourhood and Environment Bill	07/12/04
Commissioners for Revenue and Customs Bill	24/11/04
Consolidated Fund Bill	09/12/04
Consolidated Fund (appropriation) Bill	09/03/05
Constitutional Reform Bill	24/02/04
Disability Discrimination Bill	25/11/04
Drugs Bill	16/12/04
Education Bill	30/11/04
Equality Bill	02/03/05
European Union Bill	25/01/05
Finance Bill	23/05/04
Gambling Bill	18/10/04
Housing Bill	13/05/04
Identity Cards Bill	29/11/04
Inquiries Bill	25/11/04
International Organisations Bill	24/11/04
Management of Offenders and Sentencing Bill	12/01/05
Mental Capacity Bill	17/06/04
National Lottery Bill	24/11/04
Prevention of Terrorism Bill	22/02/05
Railways Bill	25/11/04
Road Safety Bill	30/11/04
School Transport Bill	14/10/04
Serious and Organised Crime Bill	24/11/04

Draft Bills:

Child Contact and Inter-Country Adoption Bill
 Commons Bill
 Company Law Bill
 Mental Health Bill
 Modernising Rural Delivery Bill
 Youth Justice Bill

Rural proofing action on Bills:

In many instances, rural proofing was not referenced in detail, but there were some specific mentions in the departmental returns, such as the Mental Capacity Bill, Identity Cards Bill and the National Lottery Bill.

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Annex two: Rural proofing by government departments

This annex includes selected highlights of the departmental returns, with commentary; the full returns can be found at www.countryside.gov.uk/EssentialServices/ruralProofing/index.asp

Key issues highlighted for 2003-4 for attention in 2004/05

This section highlights progress by departments against rural proofing activities, identified as priorities for each department in last year's report.

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)

This year, Defra has chosen to focus reporting on policies that affect rural people and communities, with less emphasis on environmental policies. In terms of food production, which remains a rural industry, there is an inherent acceptance that policies are rural proofed. Defra continues to work with other departments in the rural context, as well as work on waste strategy and flood management.

Defra has the ultimate responsibility for rural proofing regional spatial, housing and economic strategies. Although the arrangements for the rural proofing of these strategies sit with the Government Offices, it is unclear what the precise arrangements for rural proofing are. Therefore, Defra need to clarify the process for rural proofing regional strategies to ensure confidence that systematic rural proofing is taking place.

Department for Education and Skills (DfES)

The Department has maintained its commitment to rural proofing and holds regular Ministerial meetings on rural matters attended by the Chair of the Countryside Agency. As well as this, the Department has established a Rural Schools Group, which is chaired by a Minister. The Learning and Skills Council also has a Rural Issues Group. The Department has strengthened its guidance regarding rural schools closures, recognizing that often the school is the only public building in the community and its closure impacts on the whole community.

In addition to the Sure Start Local Programmes, other policies that have been rural proofed include the development of extended schools. Funding has been available since 2003-04, initially to the most disadvantaged urban and rural areas, but from 2005-06 all LEAs will be receiving funding to support the delivery of extended services in all schools over time. Levels of rurality within each local authority were taken into account when calculating each local authorities' extended schools funding allocation. The Extended Schools Prospectus recognises the important role extended schools can play in rural areas. However, we believe that monitoring needs to take place to ensure that rural needs are being met in the implementation of extended schools.

The Broadband Grant includes a 'sparsity weighting' to take into account the higher costs of connectivity in rural and hard to reach areas. All schools will have a broadband connection by 2006.

Department of Health (DoH)

DoH has a central policy team, which has been proactive in ensuring that new policies have been rural proofed. As well as the central team, many of the individual teams within the Department have actively engaged in rural proofing. The Countryside Agency has been called on to provide advice on a number of occasions. As well as this, the Department has been willing to take on board concerns raised by the Agency in various responses to consultations.

The Department has rural proofed policy implementation for regulatory measures that impact on the private sector, such as the Health Start Scheme¹². The Department has also considered the impact of their National Service Frameworks and recent Green and White Papers on rural communities, for example the promotion of gentle leisure activities in the Health Inequalities White Paper.

The Department has also been supportive of the Institute of Rural Health and their work in developing a rural proofing toolkit for health providers (PCTs/GPs/NHS Trusts/Ambulance Trusts etc).

Her Majesty's Treasury (HMT)

The Treasury, within the usual Spending Review processes, now requires all departments to rural proof their Spending Review Submissions and to ensure that all PSA targets are met through implementation in both urban and rural areas¹³. It will be particularly important that similar requirements and measures are built into the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review; at this point in time, these are unpublished but we hope that rural proofing will be part of them.

The Treasury undertook a consultation on reducing the scope of the excepted vehicles schedule, which permits the use of rebated gas oil (red diesel) in non-road vehicles. This consultation has now been completed and further policy development is under consideration. Any change will have an impact on both agricultural vehicles, inland and coastal craft (commercial and pleasure) that use diesel oil. A full evaluation of the responses to the consultation has not yet been completed.

Department of Trade and Industry (Dti)

A joint Dti/ Defra Rural Broadband Unit was set up in May 2003 specifically to bring together the Dti and Defra agendas with regard to broadband. An important output of this initiative is a research project undertaken by Defra into the impact of ICT/ broadband in rural communities, which reports later this year.

The Small Business Service is increasing uptake of business advice and support in lagging (i.e. economically under-performing) rural areas. Twenty-one projects have been undertaken and completed, funded by £2m from Defra, aimed at providing additional support in under-performing rural areas.

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)

The successful introduction of universal banking has meant that many rural communities that lost, or never had, a bank branch now have face-to-face access to banking services. Jobcentre Plus has committed to use the rural proofing checklist and the Pension Service provides Information Points in all rural localities.

¹².Extending the range of food to families in receipt of benefit; considered in light of fewer outlets in rural areas

¹³.If met in 7 out of 9 service areas as specified in PSA4 technical note

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM)

In respect of the provision of affordable housing in rural areas, ODPM have an ongoing commitment to increase the number of Annual Development Programme approvals in small rural settlements of less than 3,000 people from 800 in 2000-1 to 1,600 in 2003-4 and the commitment to increase these to 3,500 over the years 2004-5 and 2005-6 was announced in the Sustainable Communities Plan 2003.

In line with the Sustainable Communities Plan, targets for 2006-7 and beyond will be set at regional level on the advice of the Regional Housing Boards. The Department has stated that all Regional Housing Strategies are rural proofed. However, it is unclear to what extent. Strategies, therefore, need to be fully assessed to determine the extent to which rural housing needs, in both small rural settlements and market towns, have been provided for.

The new PPG3 policy, introduced in January 2005, encourages local authorities to allocate sites solely for affordable housing in rural areas, alongside the continuing 'rural exceptions' approach. This policy is too early to assess but represents a positive development in making more land available for affordable housing in small communities. Importantly, this approach allows for local authorities to adopt a strategic approach in planning for affordable housing in small rural settlements. The Wealden District Council HOPE project, which has adopted this approach and has been supported by the Commission, will provide useful evidence as to what extent the policy has the potential to be successful in rural communities across the country.

Cabinet Office

The Cabinet Office continues to demonstrate commitment to rural policy proofing. Rural proofing has been further integrated into the Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) process to improve understanding about the importance of rural proofing. Cabinet Office worked with Defra to draft new RIA guidance, making the need for rural proofing more explicit. The guidance is used across government, which should help to ensure that the consequences of policies for rural communities are considered by a large number of policy officials.

For example, the Department of Health is using the guidance to develop RIAs that fully consider the impact of policies on rural areas (including those on NHS Pharmaceutical Regulations 2005, the Green Paper Independence, Well-being, and Choice: Our Vision for the future for Social Care for Adults in England 2005 and the National Service Framework for Renal Services).

Furthermore, a new page on the Countryside Agency rural proofing website is helping to improve understanding about the importance of rural proofing and why it needs to be considered as part of an RIA. It can be viewed at:

<http://www.countryside.gov.uk/EssentialServices/ruralProofing/RIARI/index.asp>

Department for Transport (DfT)

Good progress has been made in respect of work to improve road safety across the rural road network. The current review of the Road Safety Strategy provides an update on the developments and progress made on the commitments given in the strategy. The commitments of particular relevance to rural areas were the introduction of longer-term, more co-ordinated local planning on local roads and improvements for walkers and cyclists, as well as motor traffic, through local transport plans. Also relevant are the commitments that safety will continue to be part of the planning framework for main and local routes and that local transport plans will be used to promote safer neighbourhoods. Progress on local efforts to reduce casualties will be monitored.

Guidance to local authorities on village speed limits was published in January 2004. Work is now underway to revise current guidance on setting local speed limits. A publication on Setting Local Speed Limits was published in November 2004. The guidance also covers enforcement, traffic calming, cameras and speed limit order making.

The Department has performed less well in respect of less conventional means of providing public transport. For example, the Department has provided no assessment of the coverage of community transport. Also, there is no acknowledgement of the ending of the Rural Bus Challenge scheme and what alternative funding/schemes are available.

Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA)

The responsibility for running Magistrates Courts was taken on by Her Majesty's Court Service in April 2005 and DCA have acknowledged the need for rural proofing. However, while they have stated that rural proofing could be used by each of the 42 Courts Boards, they do not require them to do so.

DCA are moving towards the co-location of Magistrates Courts and County Courts, which may be problematic for some rural areas, depending on the nature of each individual co-location and what has been closed. The Countryside Agency's rural proofing checklist could be used by each of the 42 Courts Boards, when decisions about the future of local courts are being considered. This would ensure rural interests are taken into account.

Home Office (HO)

The changes in procedures for Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs), which make them less bureaucratically burdensome, should benefit smaller, less well-resourced CDRPs, which those in rural areas tend to be. The reductions in requirements to travel are benefits of the changes to Street Bail and Police and Criminal Evidence Reviews.

Change Up, Compact Plus and Futurebuilders (all related to strengthening the voluntary and community sector) appear to have gone through a proper consideration of the needs of rural organisations, partly through consultation and through representation by Defra and others.

Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)

There has been a phased approach to the implementation of the new Licensing Act that has caused some concern amongst rural businesses, on the basis of fears concerning potential increased costs and the regulatory burden for village halls has been a particular issue. The Countryside Agency recognises that DCMS has been willing to develop a positive working solution and rural proofing of the Act is an on-going process.

Arts Council England (ACE) has commissioned a consultant to undertake a major rural proofing exercise to look at the delivery of its services to rural areas. An action plan was produced in March 2005 and is in the process of ratification by the ACE Council.

DCMS continues to develop tourism policy outlined in the policy statement 'Tomorrow's Tourism Today' (DCMS, July 2004), especially regarding the priority areas of marketing and e-tourism, business data and skills, which will have important benefits for rural communities. DCMS is taking forward a programme of projects to help improve sector productivity, where analysis strongly suggests that interventions by government can make a real difference.

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Annex three: Rural proofing at the regional level

Introduction

This section summarises evidence on rural proofing activity at the regional level, drawing in the main on information provided by the GORs.

For this year, Government Offices were asked to report, in addition to their rural Proofing work across the piece, specifically on progress made in Rural proofing the Change Up Framework and local Public Service Agreements/Local Area Agreements. Two case studies are included here as illustration of progress made and challenges faced.

Government Offices for the Regions

Government Office for the North East (GONE) continues to promote rural proofing across the Region's delivery bodies and agencies. Rural proofing now has widespread recognition, assisted by the high profile given to the Rural Strategy 2004. GONE's role now is increasingly concerned with identifying and encouraging good practice and improving the rural evidence base. This has been assisted by the transfer of some Countryside Agency staff, as part of the MRD programme.

The Northern Way – Influence has been brought to bear upon the 'Northern Way', as it emerged and was refined to its present state. Initially, this strategy had little recognition of rural issues but the rural proofing agenda provided the hook with which to bring influence to bear, the result of which has been that two City Region Development Plans now show an awareness of rural issues that once seemed most unlikely. The remaining six are still to exhibit a rural awareness in their plans.

Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber (GOYH). The rural proofing checklists have been circulated widely by GOYH and limited joint awareness raising was undertaken with the Countryside Agency. The view of GOYH is that checklists are useful as initial awareness raising tools but, now that task has been accomplished, the focus needs to shift to more outcome-focussed activity. Rural proofing is now well embedded across the principal regional structures, including Yorkshire Forward (the Regional Development Agency) and the Regional Assembly.

Health – The need for the delivery of good health services and the maintenance of good health have been developed and supported on several initiatives. Close support has improved the Regional Health Framework to include rural health as an element of the wider whole within 'Our Region, Our Health'. Additionally, a cross GOYH group has formed to produce an action plan to reduce fuel poverty more quickly in rural areas.

Government Office for the North West (GONW). The promotion by GONW and others of rural proofing since 2001 is now leading to a cultural change in approach by policy developers and deliverers in the Region, with signs that rural proofing is becoming mainstreamed and does not always, therefore, require the rigorous application of the checklist. Notably, North West Rural Affairs Forum are promoting rural proofing practices and policies and it is now part of the Integrated Appraisal Toolkit.

Regional Economic Strategy (RES). - In 2003, the RES contained a separate rural chapter and an undertaking to continue with specific rural regeneration projects under the umbrella of the Rural Renaissance Programme with an overarching commitment to 'encourage a more diverse rural economy, ensuring that rural issues are fully considered'. The RES application process now contains a rural proofing appraisal question and the nation's first rural regeneration company has been formed – Rural Regeneration Cumbria.

Government Office for the East Midlands (GOEM). The rural affairs team in GOEM has continued to develop the rural capability of the Government Office. The initial focus for rural affairs is through the Rural Director and Rural Team but it is evident from the past year's experience and internal feedback that many teams have had an ongoing rural dimension and are developing an awareness of the rural effect of their work. The past year has seen an emphasis on identifying positive outcomes from the agenda and addressing any remaining barriers. A Management Board meeting was held within GOEM to be updated on rural proofing, as part of mainstream policy delivery to all teams.

East Midlands Integrated Toolkit – During the year, GOEM facilitated, through the East Midlands Regional Local Government Association, an evaluation of the Toolkit and its effectiveness in addressing rural issues. The Toolkit includes a range of questions that enable policy makers to rural proof their plans. It covers young people, health, environment and rural issues and has been developed by the Regional Assembly to ensure full consideration of these issues in the development of strategies. The recent work here has further improved the consideration of rural issues in the Region.

Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM). The dialogue between the Rural Team and colleagues across GOWM clearly demonstrates that geographical teams 'think rural' when assessing issues. However, the main barrier to successful rural proofing remains the lack of effort by government departments to involve the Government Office at an early stage of developing new initiatives or activities. In addition, there is still concern that agencies still produce best practice guides without referral back to the Government Office, who then remain unable to discuss findings with departments.

Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) – The publication of the RSS clearly demonstrated the inclusion of rural issues for the benefit of the West Midlands, notwithstanding the Strategy's emphasis upon urban renewal. This along with the Regional Development Agency's (RDA) Rural Renaissance Strategy, the continued development of the Rural Accord and the work undertaken on the Regional Housing Strategy show the linkages that are so important to ensure policies and strategies link together. The creation of the West Midlands Regional Skills Partnership and the ongoing development of the Rural Skills Leadership Group again demonstrate the importance key strategies place on rural issues.

Government Office for the East of England (GO-East) – The approach to rural proofing has largely been subsumed into the process of developing a Regional Rural Delivery Framework, with the Countryside Agency fully involved in this work. The emphasis has moved away from the checklist approach towards encouragement to other teams within GO-East to embed the principles of 'think rural' in their approach to identifying need and prioritising. Usefully, Countryside Agency staff transferring into GO-East as part of the MRD programme, have moved to the Community Development Team, rather than the Rural Team, to help mainstream rural activity across the wider social inclusion agenda.

Rural Transport – The draft Regional Transport Strategy was published in December 2004. Inevitably, the Strategy reflects intent at this stage rather than delivery but it does focus on rural issues, identifying transport and wider social concerns that have a bearing on the access needs of rural communities. Rural proofing of the Strategy was undertaken by the GO-East transport Team, represented directly on the Transport Task Group. Work is now ongoing in proofing the Local Transport Plans (LTPs), which are being developed by local authorities for the period 2006-2011. These LTPs are required to include a framework accessibility strategy which will, inter alia, enable the accessibility needs of people living and working in rural areas to be identified.

Government Office for the South East (GOSE) have circulated the delivery checklist widely and are developing new proximity focussed advice to Government Office staff on rural proofing as part of the process to have locality managers. A member of the Rural Team has been appointed to represent Defra within each of the 4 GOSE area teams, thus ensuring 'rural' is embedded geographically across the South East.

Rural Health – Rural proofing of the health agenda has been undertaken, relating to the health dividend and the benefits of healthy living on the rural economy as a whole. In particular, this year the focus has been on school meals and local produce and the access and healthy walking agendas. Significant and continuing work with the South East Food and Health Group has ensured that benefits of sourcing local food for the 'fruit into schools' scheme is appreciated and promotes the sustainability, rural economy and health benefits of local food.

Government Office for the South West (GOSW). The South West Rural Affairs Forum is now well established to influence and monitor delivery of policy in rural areas and it has a major rural proofing role in the Region. GOSW continues to devote considerable resource to ensuring the Forum is effectively supported in this work. GOSW staff have moved beyond the initial awareness raising phase of rural proofing and are beginning to dig deep on specific rural issues. This requires much more sophisticated rural proofing. Partners recognise the rural delivery issue as a major one but need advice, support and often additional resources to tackle it and so secure good outcomes for rural people. Efforts are increasingly being focussed on where GOSW have been less successful to date with rural proofing. There is a recognition that lessons need to be learned, good practice gleaned and to ensure this is adopted.

Children and Young People – Development of a rural protocol between Somerset Youth Services, Connexions and Somerset Youth Partnership for the delivery of youth services to rural communities. Additionally, the idea of Youth Hubs has become popularised, extending the range of activities young people in rural areas can access within a safe environment (the Rollercoaster in Sydenham is Somerset's first pilot Youth Hub). Further initiatives, such as the Connexions Card and Connexions Direct helpline, are important for those needing to remotely access services and advice.

Case Studies and RDAs

Change Up – Government Office for the North West

In the early part of 2004, GONW facilitated the early development of three rural voluntary and community sector consortia in Cheshire, Cumbria and Lancashire. Each consortium developed a rural infrastructure investment plan, by bringing together an extensive range of partners to agree a vision and action plan.

Based on the experience gained through the establishment of the rural consortia, it was agreed that it would be logical for the Home Office Change Up programme in the NW to evolve the three rural consortia into the full Change Up consortia, thus helping to ensure that rural issues were not lost within the wider implementation of the programme.

It was always recognised that the Change Up programme would need to be rural proofed and GONW assisted the HO and Defra with the development of the national rural proofing advice for the programme. Once agreed, GONW ensured that the rural proofing guidance was accounted for in the development of all five consortia, including the two new consortia in Merseyside and Manchester.

Change Up rural considerations in the North West are further being assisted by:

- GONW rural partnerships team being represented on the Regional Advisory Group;
- GONW rural partnership team participating on the Change Up consortia assessment panel;
- GONW funding the development of a specific VCS rural proofing resource to advise and support the five consortia.

Together, the actions of GONW and partners in the North West have ensured that rural is an accepted part of the Change Up programme and the needs of rural communities are not overlooked.

Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs)– Second Generation case study: Government Office for the East of England

GO-East involvement in developing LPSA2 was almost entirely at the start of the process in 2004. It ensured that identified priorities linked with community strategy themes, CPA improvement plans and so on, which invariably contained a rural dimension. In addition, the GO used its crosscutting geographic intelligence group to ensure that rural issues were identified and referred to the ODPM LPSA negotiating team.

There are six county authorities and four unitaries in the Region, with only Norfolk at present having an approved second generation agreement.

Shared experience from the first generation of LPSAs revealed a limited emphasis on them to meet rural needs. A number of agreed targets did impact on rural issues, but few were exclusively rural. To support local authorities undertaking second generation bids, the Countryside Agency, Local Government Association, GO-East and other government departments worked with Cardiff University to research what rural lessons had been learned from the first round. This ultimately has led to publication of a national guide for local authorities, 'Thinking Rural within LPSAs', offering examples of best practice and key messages in recognising and including rural aims in LPSA2 process.

Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) 2004-5

How RDAs are currently rural proofing

Anecdotal evidence suggests the structures that RDAs have created for their rural teams have an impact on their varying approaches to rural proofing. Some have set up rural teams which are largely responsible for rural activity at the central and policy levels. Others have created rural teams who are supported by wider directorates, who all have a responsibility for ensuring that rural is delivered, usually at a sub regional level. For example, the South East of England Development Agency (SEEDA) and Yorkshire Forward both have a central rural policy team, now supported by a team of rural area managers whose role includes informal rural proofing of area team activity and, specifically, ensuring that sub regional plans reflect the correct priority for rural activity. The intention is that rural will become mainstreamed into the work of the area teams and will become an implicit consideration in any policy or delivery project. In the East Midlands Development Agency (EMDA), however, there is no such area structure but each policy team has a nominated rural lead officer, whose role it is to liaise with the rural policy team. The aspiration here is that this 'link officer' will take responsibility for rural proofing the wider work of their team, with support from the rural policy team.

Clearly a range of structures and approaches exist across the RDAs. All RDAs are, however, key members of Regional Rural Delivery Framework management groups and of Regional Rural Affairs Forums.

Many RDAs are leading the process of the review of their Regional Economic Strategy (RES) and are aware of the need to ensure that the rural dimension is built into these important strategic documents. In pursuit of this, both SEEDA and EMDA have built in a rural consultation event to help inform the RES development. Indeed, the RES team in the East Midlands were taken on a rural tour by the rural team at EMDA. Furthermore, the North West Development Agency (NWDA) has adopted an overarching commitment to 'encourage a more diverse rural economy, ensuring that rural issues are fully considered when developing programmes for the five strategic priorities' in taking forward its RES review.

In the West Midlands, Advantage West Midlands (AWM) has produced a 'sister' document to the RES, outlining specific rural renaissance strategies for the Region.

The future- how RDAs might develop rural proofing

The key for most RDAs seems to lie in the concept of mainstreaming. For the rural teams, this appears to be their next target, now that rural is well embedded as a distinct strand of all RDAs' workplans. Both SEEDA and EMDA recognise this as a way of making rural a sustainable activity. Where RDAs have adopted the sub regional approach, with teams in support of these and these teams supported by an outposted member of the central rural team, there is essentially a structure to support the implementation of this vision. However, not all RDAs are in this position yet, for example ONE North East.

European policy delivery in rural areas.

The EU is the source of over 50 per cent of the UK's legislation. The Countryside Agency commissioned work (CJA Consultants, 2004) to look at how the rural dimension was considered in the development and delivery of EU directives and regulations. For England, France and Sweden, the transposition and delivery of three directives was compared.

The main findings were that there was no EU equivalent to rural proofing but there were impact assessments for social, economic and environmental factors where many of the issues raised by the rural proofing checklist might fit. During transposition into UK law, a RIA should be carried out. The Cabinet Office's process does direct the assessor toward rural proofing guidance, though, in the examples cited, this was overlooked. There is no parallel scheme to rural proofing in Sweden or France. Finally, the work considered the issue of 'gold plating'¹⁵, but found that most allegations came down to political choice by that country and these complaints were also made in other countries as well as within the UK.

Rural proofing: A global perspective

As a follow up piece of work to the EU study, the CRC examined the systems for capturing the rural dimension in 18 countries around the world. The major finding from this work appeared to be that England led the way in developing a system for rural impact appraisal; its key features being that its scope covered all 'home departments'; that it covered policy as well as legislation; and that it was externally monitored by the Countryside Agency.

In other countries, there are a wide variety of different assessment tools in use, many recent and some of more relevance to 'rural' impact than others. In Scandinavia, regional impacts are assessed, which often act as a proxy for rural impact, and this is usually a legislative requirement. However, in most countries, rural communities still rely primarily on political lobbying to ensure their concerns are addressed. In the Czech Republic and New York State, the government and state government respectively, have developed an in-depth system of stakeholder consultation. However, generally it is the policies with an obvious rural component that are the ones where this dimension is considered, much like the situation in England prior to the Rural White Paper.

The work has suggested further more detailed work to look at the systems in five countries. Of particular relevance is the Irish example where 'Rural Proofing' was launched through a rural white paper (1999)¹⁶ and was very similar to that in England. However, this seemed to lose much of its momentum and effectiveness when responsibility for rural proofing and its monitoring was moved within government.

¹⁴.EU Policy Delivery in English Rural Areas, 2004 and Rural Proofing; a Global Perspective, 2005. Unpublished reports to the Countryside agency by CJA Consultants

¹⁵.Going over and above the requirements of the legislation

¹⁶.In March 2002 they followed up the White Paper by publishing guidelines for implementing rural proofing procedure

The pioneers

It appears that England leads the way worldwide in developing a largely effective system for rural impact appraisal. Its key features are its scope – all 'home departments' and covering policy as well as legislation – and its external monitoring by the Countryside Agency, now the Commission for Rural Communities.

Some other countries have developed relevant systems but none appears as effective and comprehensive as England's 'rural proofing'.

Canada has a well-developed programme 'Through the Rural Lens' which may yield some replicable ideas. It has the same focus on 'rural' needs and impacts. However, its limitations mean that it has under-performed its potential to date.

Norway and Denmark have broadly similar systems, based on assessing regional rather than rural impacts. These have provided scope for rural issues to come to the fore.

Australia also bases its system on regional, rather than rural, analysis but has applied these ideas extensively at state, as well as national, level. At the state level, rural impacts may be more likely to be revealed because smaller scale can mean sharper relief.

Germany addresses rural in its regional impact assessments, but is disappointing at Federal level, but some Länder have made progress. Bavaria has been identified as the land of most interest.

Finland's regional, rather than rural, impact assessment process is reported not to tackle specifically the rural dimension. There is a high-level rural policy committee that plays an important role in ensuring rural impacts are considered in policy development across a broad range of policy areas.

Ireland might have produced the most comparable results, since it has a genuine system of 'rural proofing', even described as such. However, Ireland lacks a body comparable with the Countryside Agency to monitor and maintain pressure for effective action. As a result, the picture is more one of aspiration than fulfillment. The momentum appears to have been lost.

New York State has a system called 'rural flexibility analysis'. The analysis is the responsibility of the proposers of any legislative measure. It is open to challenge – but in the courts. It is necessary for those dissatisfied to mount a legal action, claiming that the inadequacy means non-compliance with a procedural requirement.

Mexico has a legislative requirement for impact assessment across a broad range of government activity. However, it does not deal specifically with rural impact and its severe limitation is that the requirement is attached to the annual expenditure budget. Only spending programmes are assessed.

Annex five: Rural Services Standard progress report 2004-5

The Countryside Agency has produced three separate stand-alone progress reports on the Rural Services Standard, published in July each year since 2001-2.

A review of the Rural Services Standard, carried out in 2003 by Defra and assisted by the Countryside Agency, resulted in the production of 'Rural Services Review: Reviewing Standards 2004', first published in November 2004. It contains the Rural Services Standard, but in a much more user-friendly, magazine style publication, illustrated by case studies which show what the standards mean for rural people and what can be done locally to meet them.

Following this review, it was agreed that the Rural Services Standard progress report should be included within the Commission for Rural Communities' rural proofing report, now to be published in the autumn of each year. Monitoring of rural proofing and the Rural Services Standard are commitments from the Rural White Paper. They will be key elements of the Commission's watchdog role. This annex covers:

1. Progress on priorities identified for 2004-05;
2. Emerging issues;
3. Results of the evaluation of the Rural Services Review;
4. Priorities for 2005/06;
5. Conclusions.

1. Progress on priorities identified for 2004-5

In last year's report we identified priorities for 2004-5.

Progress on these is as follows:

Completion of the work on identifying an indicator of likely needs against formal public and private sector childcare provision

The analysis of information, based on Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) data, Census of Population 2001 and the Indices of Deprivation 2004, has generated a database covering all statistical wards within England, including urban as well as rural areas. The wards used match those used in the publication of the Census of Population 2001, the Indices of Deprivation 2004 and the most recent classification of urban and rural areas in England. In summary, the national childcare indicator tells us that for provision for 0 - 7 year olds:

- in rural areas, there is an average of 3.8 children per childcare place, compared to 4.4 children per place in urban areas and an overall national average of 4.3 children per place;
- the lowest level of provision is concentrated in the 10 per cent most deprived wards within rural towns, at levels that are lower than even the most disadvantaged urban areas.

A useable indicator of provision has been developed and the pattern of rural provision has been examined in detail. The weaknesses of the analysis are that it does not cover 8 - 14 year olds and it is not an indicator of demand or of whether there is a specifically rural dimension

to access to childcare as opposed to levels of provision. In addition, updating the database will require significant analytical effort. Any further boundary changes and definition changes will have considerable implications for the ease with which the indicator can be replicated in future¹⁷. Other concerns are examined in more detail below in Section 2 on emerging issues.

Research on the impact on rural post offices of the transfer of benefit and pensions payments to Automatic Credit Transfer (ACT)

In December 2004, the Countryside Agency commissioned an additional, rural analysis of a survey carried out by MORI for the National Federation of Subpostmasters. Its main findings were:

- the post office income derived by English rural subpostmasters is significantly less than that attained by English urban subpostmasters. However, the impact of the recent changes has been proportionate and, in most cases, not substantially different from that experienced by English urban subpostmasters;
- the rural monthly income from card account transactions remains low at £10, just 42 per cent of that achieved by urban subpostmasters (£24). The rural monthly average of £16 for card account openings is 50 per cent of that achieved by urban subpostmasters (£32);
- the rural monthly average of £70 for automated bill payments is 36% of that achieved by urban subpostmasters (£197);
- half of all rural subpostmasters are not optimistic about the next six months, while the other half say they can at least see a future for their business.

The National Federation of Subpostmasters is hoping to carry out a further survey later this year and we propose to commission a further rural analysis of the resulting data to track change.

Work with Defra on the preparation of the Rural Services Standard 2004 and with government departments and regional and local partners to identify examples of good practice to include in it

During Summer and Autumn 2004 the Countryside Agency has worked with Defra on the editorial board for the production of the new Rural Services Review and provided a wide range of contacts and sources of case study examples for the Review.

Monitoring and reporting on existing and new standards introduced in the new Rural Services Review 2004

A table outlining progress to data on individual standards can be found on the website:

www.countryside.gov.uk/EssentialServices/ruralProofing/index.asp

Continuing to refine existing standards and working with government departments to develop more focused and rurally sensitive standards

In February and March 2005, Defra and the Countryside Agency, as part of the regular annual commitment to review the Standard, held a series of meetings with government departments to review and update the current standards and discuss possible new standards for 2005.

¹⁷.Rural Proofing Report 2004-5

2. Emerging issues

Childcare provision

Our research has shown that:

- there is an information gap in the knowledge of childcare provision in both rural and urban areas. Even the statutory regulatory agencies, such as Ofsted, experience problems in terms of incomplete data and, therefore, cannot provide robust and detailed results/analysis on many childcare issues;
- little analysis of data has been carried out at regional or ward level, with scant regard to rural/urban comparative analysis;
- LEAs are survey weary, with neither the time nor staff resources available to enable them to respond to requests for information that is not collected on a regular basis.

Consideration should therefore be given to:

- introducing rural markers on childcare data at Census Output Area level in order to provide better evidence of trends;
- widening the collection of data to include 8-14 year olds. At present, there is no statutory requirement for providers to collect information relating to childcare provided for this group, despite the National Childcare Strategy covering all ages up to 14;
- better co-ordination of childcare monitoring, with an integrated effort at local and LEA level to create a comprehensive database on existing childcare that would be useful to a number of government departments and agencies. The data collected by Ofsted are of little value unless complete and accurate responses are provided across the board.

Any further work on rural childcare issues should be in the form of area based case studies and social research with users, which could possibly be tied back to the national database that has been created.

Ambulance response times

The percentage of rural Ambulance Trusts meeting the target to respond to 75% of Category A calls within 8 minutes has improved steadily from 8.3% in 2000/01 to 86.9% in 2004-5.

As a result of the review of NHS Ambulance Services in England, from April 2006, Category B response times will be based on a single measure of 19 minutes for rural and urban areas.

Extended schools

We have commissioned research to monitor the development of extended schools in 11 local authorities and to identify examples of good practice. It found that local authorities in rural areas were not approaching the roll-out of extended schools in any substantively different way to those in urban areas, despite the different challenges facing schools in these areas. In spite of this, there was a wide range of services being offered through extended schools in two-thirds of the authorities in the sample, with examples of multi-agency working. 8% of schools in the sample offered some form of service covering the five components of the core extended schools offer (8am – 6pm year round childcare/varied menu of activities for children and young people;

parenting support; swift and easy referral to a wide range of specialist support services and community access to the school's facilities, including adult learning). However, no school in the sample currently provided 8am – 6pm childcare all year round. It is recommended that existing provision be audited, in order to build on what is currently available and more rural school partnerships/networks are needed to ensure the widest access to core services.

School closures

The presumption against the closure of rural schools has been moderately successful in reducing the rate of closures. The closure rate increased from five in 1998 to twelve in 2003, with a slight decrease to nine in 2004. However, a fall in primary school rolls means that rural school closures are likely to continue and we shall continue to monitor them. The impact on the community of the closure of its school may be greater in rural areas and guidance for Schools Organisations Committees (SOCs), introduced in October 2004, contains the requirement that SOCs must take into account the overall effect on the community and consider the wider role played by the school in the community.

Post office closures

The formal requirement on the Post Office to maintain the rural network and to prevent any avoidable closures of rural post offices has had a positive impact on stemming closures in England, which have reduced from 306 in 2000-1 to 97 in 2004-5.

However, although an extension of the support of up to £150 million a year for the rural network from April 2006 to April 2008 was announced in September 2004, it is not clear whether Government will keep the requirement to prevent avoidable closures beyond March 2006. If this commitment is not maintained until a strategy for the future of the rural network has been developed and consulted upon, there is a danger that post office closures could accelerate in an unplanned way, leading to gaps in provision of postal services.

Data collection

There are still difficulties in obtaining data to monitor the standards in a form that is easily useable. For example, there is currently no information available, rural or urban, on progress with the December 2005 target concerning choice of at least four to five different healthcare providers and there is no rural/urban breakdown available for the percentage of primary and secondary schools with broadband connectivity.

Targets set at regional and local level

Where targets are set at regional and local level, as is the case with the police and fire services, it is essential that appropriate mechanisms are in place to enable progress to be monitored effectively, either regionally or nationally.

3.Evaluation of the Rural Services Review

In February 2005, Defra commissioned an evaluation of the new style Rural Services Review. It evaluated the views of the three main target groups (rural public, service providers and lobby groups) on the Review compared to the old style Rural Services Standard. Its aim was to identify:

- whether the new style provides clearer information on access to public services that rural communities can expect to achieve;
- the strengths and weaknesses of the new approach;
- whether it has been successful in reaching its target audience;
- whether it is a useful tool and if not, what changes are required.

The results showed that more still needed to be done to raise awareness of the Review and the Rural Services Standard. The in-depth interviews revealed that overall virtually all were happy with the style and range of the subjects covered but had reservations that it was too glossy and required more detail on how to get local facilities started and on dealing with rural issues. The Review was seen as broadly relevant and a good overall source of information about how rural service standards can and do affect the lives of people who live in rural areas. Defra will be using the findings of the evaluation to develop it further.

4.Priorities for the Commission and others for 2005/06

- continue to refine existing standards and work with Defra and other government departments to develop more focussed and rurally sensitive standards.
- monitor and report on existing and new standards introduced in the Rural Services Review 2005.
- further research on the impact of the transfer of benefit and pensions payments to ACT in association with the National Federation of Subpostmasters.
- research in association with Postwatch on the social role of rural post offices which will help inform policy decisions on the future of the rural network.
- consider setting future targets for the standards within a longer time horizon.

5.Conclusions/recommendations

The review of the Rural Services Standard and the subsequent production of the Rural Services Review 2004 has led to the Rural Services Standard becoming more focused.

However, there is a trend towards developing standards and setting targets at a more local and regional level. While this helps to ensure that rural needs and circumstances are taken into account, it is essential that rigorous systems are in place, including the collection of rural/urban data, to monitor progress on achieving targets, so that an overview of progress at national level can be taken.

The current commitment to prevent avoidable post office closures lapses in March 2006 but the financial arrangements to support the rural network have been rolled forward until 2008. We recommend that the commitment to prevent avoidable closures is maintained, until a strategy for the future of the rural network has been developed and consulted upon.

The existing and planned provision of extended schools should be audited to ensure that rural needs are being met.

Monitoring of childcare provision could be better co-ordinated, with a more integrated approach at local level to create a comprehensive database on existing childcare, which could be used by a number of government departments and agencies.

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