



Local Area Agreements – ‘Thinking Rural’

Our commentary notes – designed to help all those seeking to rural proof LAAs

1. LAAs are the primary agreements between central and local government (and partners) on local delivery of both national and local priorities. They have the ambition of guiding the totality of local public expenditure towards the aims of both central and local government.
2. The Government has made it clear that one of its guiding principles for service delivery is that “no-one should be disadvantaged by where they live”¹. The Government also wants to see greater participation, engagement and control of services within local *neighbourhoods*.
3. The Commission for Rural Communities has prepared these commentary notes to help all those involved in preparing, negotiating, influencing, delivering and monitoring LAAs, to consider the implications for *rural* places, their communities and economies².
4. About nine and a half million people live in rural England (roughly 20% of the overall population). Within this total 600,000 people live in the most sparsely populated areas. All of these people, obviously, live within local authority areas: mainly the shire district and county councils but also within unitary and metropolitan district areas.
5. The CRC has discussed with a number of interested parties, including both Defra and the DCLG, how to help the LAA process to work effectively for our rural communities.
6. We note that there is a lot of LAA support activity ongoing involving DCLG, other government departments, the LGA and the IDeA and others. We do not wish to duplicate any of this.
7. LAAs are all about improving social, economic and environmental conditions at the local level. Yet LAAs are based on county, unitary and metropolitan local authority boundaries.

¹ See, for example, paragraph 2.6 of the Local Government White Paper 2006, <http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/currentagenda/strongprosperous/>

² Because, for example, in the DCLG's ‘*Local Area Agreements Road Shows Report, April 2007*’ there was a “strong message from two tier areas that central government appears to have a London-centric and unitary view of local government. It is thought that, as a result of that view, many policy initiatives are a much better fit for unitary areas than they are for two tier areas”.

These are administrative boundaries that do not necessarily reflect people's daily lives, based on their neighbourhoods and localities and daily travel patterns. So, within these authority areas there are many different places. Those negotiating and delivering LAAs need to beware any assumptions of homogeneity. They need to consider carefully the different needs of neighbourhoods and other communities within their area. They need to ensure that targets reflect differing geographical needs within the LAA area, where necessary.

8. Where LSPs develop Multi Area Agreements (MAAs), then this need becomes even more important. Likewise, moves towards shire unitary authorities based on counties or district mergers will tend to increase the number and diversity of different neighbourhoods and communities within the new authority areas.
9. This emphasis on the differences between and within areas leads, amongst other things, to a need to 'think rural' and to 'rural proof' plans, targets and actions. Thinking rural in relation to LAAs, and the priorities and improvement targets they contain, means considering the case for:
 - equitable delivery between urban and rural areas;
 - closing any gaps between rural and urban areas;
 - meeting specific rural priorities.
10. This may then lead to:
 - Area – wide targets, but with rural proofing to ensure equitable delivery and involving monitoring impacts, using the ONS urban/rural definition. This may be the most common approach to rural proofing, one of 'mainstreaming' rural into an authority's various delivery plans;
 - Dedicated rural issue targets, where there is a distinct rural *issue* across an authority;
 - Dedicated rural area targets, where there is a distinct rural *area* within the authority that has a particular need for improvement.
11. Local authorities and their partners should discuss their ideas, possible targets and measures, along with datasets, with their Government Office (GO).
12. But neither the CRC, Defra nor any other national organisation can tell regional and local bodies exactly what should be in a LAA to show that it successfully addresses those rural agendas and issues that need to be addressed. This is only a process that can be achieved by those working on the LAAs at regional and local levels.
13. This will include rural local authorities, rural councillors at all levels, parish and town councils, Rural Community Councils, Councils of Voluntary Service, Development Trusts, County Associations of Local Councils, local authority level rural partnerships, committees and forums, Regional Rural Affairs Forums, Regional Development Agencies and others.

³ See, for example, good practice on LAAs available of the IDeA website, <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=1174195> , and also some of the lessons emerging from the Defra supported Rural Pathfinder programme, <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=5569390> and <http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/ruraldelivery/pathfinders/default.htm>

⁴ See <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/nationalindicator>

⁵ As of October 2007 this is undetermined.

14. However, we can advise on some of the issues and questions that may need to be addressed to help make this Rural Proofing happen. We want all interested parties to:
 - Encourage the asking of the right type of rural proofing questions (see Annex A);
 - Support the collection and dissemination of practice and good practice³;
 - Promote the role and value and support for the urban rural definition, particularly in deploying the indicator set for the Performance Framework for Local Authorities⁴ (see Annex B);
 - Monitor the LAA process and its sensitivity to rural circumstances. Again, this will require extensive use of the urban rural definition.
15. It is also of note that Defra, as the 'rural' department of state, has a Departmental Strategic Objective to support 'strong rural communities'. How Defra decide to define and measure this ought to be of importance and use to those involved in Rural Proofing LAAs⁵.
16. Defra will be providing additional support and guidance materials to the GOs to support them in their Rural Proofing role, in asking Rural Proofing questions as part of their challenge function with those involved in developing LAAs.
17. **We recommend that in each region the Rural Affairs Forum and the GO should discuss calling together a roundtable meeting of all interested parties to discuss the Rural Proofing of LAAs.** The CRC would be willing to participate in any such roundtable meetings.
18. Those interested in the Rural Proofing of LAAs need to engage effectively in the LAA process. This means being involved in early discussions and consultations. It means having a clear view, supported by evidence, about the local priorities and needs of rural people and places. This might be based on statistics but it might also be based on data from parish plans and market town plans. It means engaging with some of the technical issues around the indicators and targets. It means asking questions.
19. It should also be noted that the LAAs and the associated national indicator set for the Performance Framework for Local Authorities are part of a wider performance management framework for the whole of Government, as set out in the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007 and its associated PSA targets and Departmental Strategic Objectives.
20. Finally, we note and support the strong principles of local democracy embedded within the process. Circumstances, needs and priorities, and their delivery, are different between different areas. This reality will rightly continue to be reflected in different LAAs for different localities.
21. The CRC is interested in any feedback to this paper. Feedback can be sent to: Crispin Moor (crispin.moor@ruralcommunities.gov.uk)

Annex A

LAAAs – Rural Proofing questions for local and regional rural stakeholders to ask

To what extent is your LSP *capable* of addressing rural issues, either through the research and support available to it and/or through its membership? Research by the (then) Countryside Agency, indicated that LSPs faced some particular challenges in ensuring a representative voice for rural voluntary and community sector bodies, for the parish and town council sector and for the rural private sector.

In two tier areas *part* of the local improvement agenda must be to integrate district level Sustainable Community Strategies and LSPs into the county level LAA. District level LSPs will also be an important delivery and monitoring mechanism for the LAA.. Is this happening in your LAA?

Across rural England there will continue to be a need to ensure that very local community level plans, such as parish plans and market town plans, are used to inform and influence LAAAs. Is this happening in your LAA? The action groups and partnerships, and the parish and town councils that implement such community level plans, may also be a useful vehicle for delivering and/or monitoring aspects of the LAA.

To what extent are your local authorities consulting with, and being responsive to, the expressed views of rural people and groups (when they consult on their Sustainable Community Strategy targets and in preparing material for discussion of new LAAAs with Government Offices)?

Is there a case for the preamble to signed LAA agreements to make reference to the consideration and reflection of cross cutting themes, including Rural, within the LAA (as appropriate) and as reflecting the content of Sustainable Community Strategies?

CLG's 'Developing the future arrangements for LAAAs' report (February 2007) refers to the ability to establish neighbourhood level targets that can be used in the development of new LAA targets (paragraph 18). How will these work to ensure that proposed improvements for both urban and rural neighbourhoods are identified, delivered, reviewed and measured?

Researchers⁶ have reflected on the experience of Local Public Service Agreements and concluded that despite rural issues being high profile during the period 2000/2003, "in the low profile and arcane world of LPSAs agenda setting was heavily influenced by the technical criteria negotiated between central and local government officials". If this criticism has validity, how will the LAA negotiators avoid this danger this time around? How will you help to ensure that they avoid it?

How are you intending to use the urban rural definition to support the LAA process and the measurement of its delivery achievements?

Will local authority scrutiny processes help improve the effectiveness of LAAAs? How will such scrutiny work? Will there be any specific guidance to help scrutiny work well? Can cross cutting issues such as Rural be integrated into such guidance?

⁶ 'Who or what sets the agenda: the case of rural issues in England's local public service agreements', Tom Entwistle and Gareth Enticott, Policy Studies 2007

Annex B

Commentary on the national indicator set for the performance framework for local authorities.

There are 198 national indicators⁷.

Each indicator is cross referenced to relevant national PSA targets and Departmental Strategic Objectives (DSOs). However, Defra's rural DSO for 'strong rural communities' is not referenced. This is because, along with other cross cutting types of DSOs, it is potentially relevant to many if not most of the national indicators. Defra are keen to see the rural dimension being reflected, where appropriate, through the use of the urban rural definition.

A critical question for those working with these indicators will be, for each indicator, at what geographical levels are they analysable. Can they be analysed at the national level, at the local authority level and at the neighbourhood level (using the urban / rural definition) down to the smallest spatial scale available? We will be working with Defra and the DCLG to encourage the use of the urban/rural definition, and the use of neighbourhood level data, wherever this makes sense.

It is likely that the DCLG will be undertaking further consultations on some of the technical matters involved in using the national indicator set.

The national indicators are divided into the following categories:

Stronger communities – 14 indicators

There will be demands from stakeholders for many of the indicators in this category to be analysable at the neighbourhood level.

Those representing and serving rural communities may be particularly keen to see LAAs rural proofing the use of these indicators as the basis for improvement targets.

This would mean that the design, management and monitoring of the improvement targets would be at the neighbourhood level as much as at the authority level.

Safer communities – 34 indicators

Same comments as above

Children and Young People – 68 indicators

Many of these indicators will be based on data collected at the level of the school.

Those representing and serving rural communities may be interested in the geography of school location (e.g. to compare improvement in rural schools as compared to urban schools). They may also be interested in the home address of pupils (e.g. to compare improvement rates between rural and urban pupils).

⁷ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/nationalindicator>

Adult health and wellbeing – 20 indicators

Again, there may well be demands for many of the indicators in this category to be analysable at the neighbourhood level.

Those representing and serving rural communities may be particularly keen to see LAAs rural proofing the use of these indicators as the basis for improvement targets.

Tackling exclusion and promoting equality – 10 indicators

There will be demands from stakeholders for some of the indicators in this category to be analysable at the neighbourhood level.

Local economy – 33 indicators

This category includes a number of housing related indicators.

There may be demands for many of the indicators in this category to be analysable at the neighbourhood level and at other geographical levels .

Those representing and serving rural communities may be particularly keen to see LAAs rural proofing the use of these indicators as the basis for improvement targets.

Environmental sustainability – 13 indicators

Again, there may be demands for some of these indicators to be analysable at the neighbourhood level and at other geographical levels .

Rural interests may be keen to see LAAs rural proofing the use of some of these indicators as the basis for improvement targets.