



Notes for local/regional discussions on the rural proofing of Local Area Agreements

Purpose of these notes

These notes have been prepared to help those interested in the rural proofing of Local Area Agreements (LAAs) to plan and achieve their objectives. They have been informed by discussions at a meeting of interested parties hosted by the Government Office for the South East (GOSE) on 16 November 2007).

Purpose of local/regional discussions and meetings on rural proofing LAAs?

- To help GOs (including the Locality teams and the various theme based teams) to understand the perspective of those representing and serving rural communities and interests.
- To help those representing and serving rural communities and interests to understand the LAA process and the role of the GOs and of LSPs and of local authorities. To help everyone to understand the process; the points of intervention; the importance of 'the story of place'; and the importance of deploying evidence.
- To help those representing and serving rural communities and interests to network together and learn from each others' experiences and perspectives.

Who to invite and involve in such discussions and meeting?

This might include members and representatives of:

- Regional Rural Affairs Forums
- district and county based rural committees and forums
- local authorities serving rural communities
- Rural Community Councils
- Associations of Parish and Town Councils
- Development Trusts
- Regional Observatories
- RDAs
- As well as councillors of the various local government tiers representing rural communities
- and others

Possible content of the agenda for such discussions and meetings?

- Recap on Government's ambitions for LAAs
- Recap on local ambitions for the local LAA
- Role of the Government Offices in collecting information, managing negotiations, ensuring views and interests are represented, challenging any assertions with a weak evidence base
- LAA timetable – points of intervention and further consultations
- The story of (rural) places
- What does this mean and what are the implications for the LAA process and what supporting evidence is needed?
- What sort of improvement targets will help rural interests?
- What sort of monitoring of delivery will show whether rural areas are getting their fair share?
- Who are the rural representatives and how and where are they placed in LSPs and LAA negotiations?

Some discussion notes

CLG guidance makes it clear that 'the story of place' should provide the foundation of LAAs.

There are different stories of place. How these stories are written, evidenced, presented and used can be critical to the success of rural proofing. Rural representatives (elected representatives and VCS bodies and others) need to have clear stories of their places. Backed by evidence. For example, in the county/unitary and district Sustainable Community Strategies; in area plans and strategies; in parish plans; in Market Town plans, in other research and data¹ sources and so on. The more rural district and county Sustainable Community Strategies ought to cover rural interests – but all authorities serving rural communities should include rural needs and aspirations within their strategies.

Note – some local authorities are refreshing and renewing their Sustainable Community Strategies, so there will be additional opportunities here for rural interests to make their views and needs known.

For some issues the story will generally be the same in all rural areas e.g. access to services; affordable housing; response times for emergency services. There will also be *particular* stories for some rural areas e.g. regeneration; risk of flooding.

Those promoting rural interests need to have a view about LAA targets that may help:

- Close any gaps between rural and urban areas;
- Meet specific rural priorities; or about targets that may
- Secure equitable delivery between urban and rural areas.

¹ See, for example, the 'Rural Share of Deprivation in the South- East' project at: <http://www.rural-evidence.org.uk/>

Through discussions with those involved in planning, negotiating and delivering LAAs this may then lead to:

- 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.

Note - in both cases the rural issue or area could be a *component* of an overall LAA target; i.e. it could be part of a delivery plan for an LAA target.

Most commonly, however, rural proofing LAAs will be about trying to ensure equitable delivery of area wide targets in rural as much as in other areas. This is about 'the mainstreaming of rural'. For many of the priority issues facing rural societies *successful* mainstreaming is capable of delivering a lot more than rural issues being ghettoised into a stand alone 'rural box'. Mainstreaming will involve ensuring that LAA delivery plans consider the risks of unequal access and take mitigating action. It will require monitoring on a neighbourhood level, in order that differences in delivery within an authority area can be monitored and then managed as necessary.

Delivery bodies will require management information in order to deliver their services and improvement targets equitably between neighbourhoods – and between different groups in their areas – unless they have a good reason not to. The story of place, with backing evidence, may provide such reasons for some areas (e.g. with area based regeneration needs).

For many LAA targets any delivery reporting will only make sense to local people and their representatives if it is done on a neighbourhood basis. Neighbourhood based monitoring is central to the future success of LAAs. This is the shared ambition of central and local government. For example, the Local Government White Paper makes it clear that "no-one should be disadvantaged by where they live". In this respect, this is not about 'Rural Proofing' so much as it is about 'Neighbourhood proofing'.

Note - local authorities and their partners can also agree *local* improvement targets – separate from the (up to) 35 they will be agreeing with central government. As long as they are committed to delivery then, arguably, it does not matter whether improvement targets are amongst the 35 or are amongst other local improvement targets.

Stakeholders need to look at the process through the eyes of the central players – the local authorities and their delivery partners and the Government Offices (and their parent departments). The *quality* of the relationships and partnerships that rural (and other) interests are involved in may be just as important as the mechanics of the LAA process itself.

Consider, how can your organisation, or the organisations you represent, help in the delivery of LAA or local delivery targets? Is your organisation able to make a strong case for access to reward funding, if warranted by delivery?

Note - there are plenty of sectoral interests out there, other than 'rural', wanting, quite legitimately, to influence LAAs. GOs and local authorities and their partners have to listen and reflect all of these interests where this is the right thing to do. It should be appreciated that this is not always easy.

Central and local government have agreed that the reporting burden from central government on local government should be reduced. This is understandable; otherwise LAAs may collapse under the weight of their reporting and analysis complexities.

The role of the Government Office is to work with all interested parties to ensure that the LAA process does achieve its objectives, meeting the ambitions of both central government and of local authorities and LSPs. It is important that rural 'stories of place' – with supportive evidence - are communicated to GOs as well as to LSPs and local authorities. The GOs will have their own views on the stories of place, based on a wide range of evidence. They are communicating their views to local authorities and their partners (and vice versa) so that when LAA negotiations begin in earnest they will be based on a shared view on what the stories of place are for the LAA areas.

GOs will also be keen to ensure that rural (and other) interests are heard and effectively represented on LSPs and other bodies involved in preparing LAAs. It is part of their job to ask questions and to challenge to ensure that the process is inclusive of all relevant viewpoints, including rural interests.

Note – there are still plenty of unknowns, including the consultations on the proposed 'Places survey'; on the proposed Community/Councillor Call for Action; and on the implementation of the Sustainable Communities Act.

Note – the important inspection role to be played by the Audit Commission and other inspectorates in their management of the new Comprehensive Area Assessment from 2009 onwards. There will be continuing consultations on this new regime.

Conclusion

What will help the 'mainstreaming of rural' happen? Arguably, a strong focus on neighbourhood delivery, with delivery plans and monitoring to make sure that this happens.

The DCLG (and others) are aware of the dangers of unintended consequences from the deployment of delivery targets, particularly that local authorities and their partners deliver their agreed targets by concentrating their attention where there are lots of easily accessible people, i.e. in more densely populated urban areas.

Rural interests are looking to the DCLG, the GOs, the local authorities and their partners to recognise and mitigate this risk.

Crispin Moor Commission for Rural Communities, December 2007

(With thanks to Jeremy Leggett from the South East Rural Affairs Forum, Julie Price from the Government Office for the South East and to Sylvia Brown the Chief Executive of Action with Communities in Rural England)