



CRC 11/06

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Setting a new standard in rural services for the 21st century?

The fifth annual monitoring report on the national Rural Services Standard, published by the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) today, calls for local standards of service and for these to cover the quality of services as well as access for rural people.

The Rural Service Standard contains eleven commitments about the delivery of services in rural areas, including schools, bus services, broadband/Internet access, health services, care of the elderly, emergency response times and postal services.

The report shows that standards concerning the presumption against the closure of rural schools and post offices have been effective in minimising, although not eliminating, the loss of these important community assets. The latter is likely to form part of the Government's consultation on the future of the rural post office network, which is due shortly.

But there are still areas where improvement and close monitoring are needed.

The development of extended schools in rural areas, providing access to the full range of extended services and activities, is lagging behind that of urban areas. Just over 3,500 schools in England currently provide this service and, of these, only 14% are rural, although 28% of all primary and secondary schools are located in rural areas.

Programmes, such as the development of Children's Centres, need to include positive steps to ensure that rural circumstances and needs are taken into account, rather than simply relying on methods that work in urban areas.

Crispin Moor, Director of Rural Expertise at the CRC, said, "A national Rural Services Standard is useful, but it now needs to be translated to delivery at regional and local level. We need to consider whether a national Rural Service Standard alone is meaningful to people living in rural communities. For example, fair access to services at a local level might be better achieved by setting targets through Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements."

The report will form the basis of the CRC's continuing work on the Rural Services Standard in the coming year, which will include identifying and promoting good practice, where work on fair access to services has been carried out at regional and local level.

ENDS

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Notes to editors

1. This is the fifth annual monitoring report on the Rural Services Standard, and the first produced by the independent Commission for Rural Communities. The Rural Services Standard was established in 2000 in the rural White Paper, *Our countryside: the future. A fair deal for rural England*. It has been reviewed annually by Defra, in consultation with other government departments and the Commission and its predecessor, the Countryside Agency. The Commission has responsibility to monitor and report annually on the delivery of the Standard.

The report of the 2004 Services Standard was published in the Commission's annual Rural Proofing Report. <http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/CRC15.pdf>

Previous reports can be found at:

<http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/themes/~services>

2. The Rural Services Standard can be found in Defra's Rural Services Review which contains examples of how implementing the standards can help to make improvements in service delivery in rural areas.

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/pdfs/services/rural-services-review-2006.pdf>
http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/pdfs/services/rural_services_review.pdf

3. The Commission for Rural Communities was established initially as an operating division of the Countryside Agency in April 2005, and became an independent body on 1 October 2006, following the enactment of the NERC (The Natural Environment and Rural Communities) Act 2006. Our role is to provide well-informed, independent advice to government and ensure that policies reflect the real needs of people living and working in rural England, with a particular focus on tackling disadvantage.

We have three key functions:

- Rural advocate: the voice for rural people, businesses and communities
- Expert adviser: giving evidence-based, objective advice to government and others
- Independent watchdog: monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally

Further information about the Commission for Rural Communities and its work can be found at www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk