RURAL
SERVICES
NETWORK

Mind the [rural] gap - access to services and rural proofing

Discussion Summary & Participant List

The term 'mainstreaming' is often used by policy and decision makers seeking evidence on rural approaches to service delivery. What do you think it means…and does it work?

➢ Does rural need dedicated funding programmes (Big Lottery Fund consultation: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/big-lottery-fund-draft-directions-england-isle-of-man-uk-wide)
➢ Mainstreaming can be made to work but only with effective rural proofing.
➢ Mainstreaming is often aligned with downgrading or reducing resources in rural areas.
➢ Rural has to be a function within Government.
➢ With the closure of the Countryside Agency and Commission for Rural Communities, rural functions have been transferred to Whitehall/Government.
➢ The OECD England rural policy review found for mainstreaming to work needs more resource (http://www.oecd.org/gov/regional-policy/oecdruralpolicyreviewsenglandunitedkingdom.htm)
➢ For some Local Authorities mainstreaming can be a blind spot – they focus on more urban/built up areas. Rural falls off the list.
➢ Mainstreaming as a concept assumes one size fits all - in times of austerity and the drive to deliver outputs urban areas are favoured. You need to segment rural from urban otherwise you end up pouring resources into the same (urban) areas.
➢ The way you deal with urban and rural issues is felt and solved in different ways. The feeling is different between urban and rural places (the context is different even though data suggests they are sectorally very similar).
➢ Mainstreaming can lead to top down approaches being imposed in rural areas (e.g. the allocation of housing and settlement hierarchies in Local Plans).
➢ Health provision in rural areas – commitment and calls for primary health care delivery at a local level but in rural areas achieving this can be expensive and more complex. Can we take healthcare to the people? Is rural falling through the net?
➢ = How can we make Government listen to rural?
➢ = We need data and evidence that is sensitive to rural circumstances.
➢ = Mainstreaming as a principle is fine but current delivery isn't working for rural areas.

Is "Living Working Countryside" a long lost "pipe-dream" of Matthew Taylor and Gordon Brown or can it truly be made to happen? If so what might it look like?

➢ Rural England is heterogeneous rather than homogenous.
➢ There are opportunities in rural economies (e.g. people home working) but this requires broadband and mobile connectivity.
➢ There are challenges in rural economies – e.g. Lack of affordable housing, pressure on public services particularly transport, the digital agenda offered so much but has failed to deliver (e.g. Smart cities programme for urban places but no rural agenda).

- Rural lobbying has been led by NIMBYism. There has to be growth in rural areas for sustainability (e.g. some communities are writing a neighbourhood plan as they want to avoid any new housing in their settlement).
- Communities are only sustainable if they have a mix of people (ages, skills, qualifications etc.)
- You shouldn't say no to development in any village according to National Planning Policy Framework - but what the nature of that growth is and how big that growth is [the rural nuance] has been lost.
- Planning settlement hierarchies rule out any growth in some rural places - some rural places need and want growth in order for them to be sustainable.
- Communities should establish a Neighbourhood Plan if they want development and growth.
- Rural exceptions policy - why should rural areas be an exception? Why aren't we planning for those settlements just as we would for any other place? We need rural proofing.

It could be said that the EU (through programmes like LEADER) gets rural in a way that Government, who often seem to use the prefix "City" in every policy context, doesn't. Do you agree?
- Government terminology and language - city regions. What rural specific is left at a national level?
- We are one of the most urban countries in Europe.
- Concerned about the future of some European driven rural investment (e.g. CAP, LEADER). Not just about the funding but the bottom up approach taken by these investment streams.
- European funding in England can be quite constrained compared to other countries.
- The administration can be huge and burdensome for rural residents and businesses wanting to access EU funding.
- There is innovation in rural but many businesses lack capital to invest in rural areas.
- Funding streams need a Council or other big body to lead it rather than the private sector.
- Will more money be coming into rural?
- Protect existing EU money allocated to rural = compressing EU programmes. We need to lobby government.
- = Can the RSN do a stock take of total European investment in rural areas? To measure the impact of the exit and also taking into account the leverage of the investment?

Points raised during the morning session:
- Devolution deals - can funding be drawn down for the VCS sector? What are the opportunities for the VCS in devolution discussions?
- Outreach and access - targeting rural communities at risk of isolation and with poor access to services. However it's more difficult to identify these people in rural places. Using data including mosaic to identify people or going out to them and being a mobile council.
- The quality and focus of data to target resources amid declining resources. The population is changing faster than the data sources you have to make informed choices (e.g. Census). How can we have better and real time information to inform the policy and decision makers?
- The VCS is the eyes and ears on the ground for Councils - but a cultural /organisational shift is needed in the VCS sector and in Local Authorities for them to work well together into the future. There is often a lack of sharing within the VCS sector and a reluctance to cooperate.
- Rural areas more dependent on the community rather than voluntary sector.
- The VCS is not one sector.
- Advantages of VCS in rural: strong institutions such as faith groups and parish councils = how can we encourage them to look at local needs?
- Local government is occupied with procurement rather than service delivery - the procurement professionals do not understand the services they are commissioning (e.g. Place based approaches, social value - they don't have breath of experience or support to join up with communities).
- The value of grants to community groups – these groups provide early prevention support. But we want this work done well on the ground without professionalising it.

- ➢ Big charities have departments submitting bids.
- ➢ Lincs Independent Living Partnership – http://lincshia.org/lincs-independent-living-partnership/ - provides a local alternative to the big corporates.
- ➢ The scale of activity in rural areas is smaller making this more of a challenge.
- ➢ Rationalisation of VCS sector - perception in public sector that we have too many VCS organisations and these can be reduced.
- ➢ Community anchors from where services are delivered – it's easier to do this in urban areas than rural areas.
- ➢ BID Islington ' age friendly Islington' to maximise assets not being used during the day to make them accessible to older residents.
- ➢ = requires a [rural] place based approach to join things up.

Points raised during the afternoon session:
- ➢ Turning agricultural holdings into residential housing (redundant farm buildings).
- ➢ What is an affordable home?
- ➢ How can we avoid second homes and investment buyers?
- ➢ Housing Associations facing Government drive for home ownership rather than rented - associations need to look at market sales and other options to fund homes for rent.
- ➢ Trying to find loopholes in the Housing and Planning Act rather than having the freedom to develop housing.
- ➢ Getting people to be aware of and use/apply rural proofing remains an ongoing challenge.
- ➢ Policy and decision makers know of rural proofing but will they use it to improve their delivery – they avoid doing proofing because it's down to cost (sparsely, transport)? Rural proofing hasn't really taken off in 16 years.
- ➢ Cuts in Local Authority budgets since 2010 haven't made service delivery any easier in rural areas. Could you apply rural proofing to cuts to find new ways of delivering?
- ➢ Guidance on rural proofing prepared by Government wasn't promoted as well as it could have been?
- ➢ Rural proofing is all too often seen as a checklist - done at the end after the policy has been designed and as a tick box exercise. Are the 18 principles of local level rural proofing of greater utility in thinking about how you operate?
- ➢ Communities taking on more responsibility to deliver services and other things on their own account.
- ➢ Rural proofing as a way of maximising social value and could help tackle the challenges of ongoing austerity.
- ➢ Social value is about a long term return from short term intervention and not about cashable savings = we need to think about how we spend money not always doing it for less; if you continue to cut you destroy the service.
- ➢ = What's the statutory impediment to do some form of rural proofing? Rural as part of an equality impact assessment?

Final Reflections
- ➢ What is the most productive step for rural communities to do to deliver affordable housing? The community recognising the need for housing (standing up and giving voice to people reluctant to speak up in public meetings and consultations). Agree need and want which is evidence based (e.g. Housing need assessment). We should think not about ourselves but our children.
- ➢ Some people don't want affordable homes in their area.
- ➢ National Park and AONBs – these designations seen as a way around the planning system?
- ➢ Local context and identifying local need - this is about actual need not top down.
- ➢ How systematically are we linking growth and employment to affordable housing need?
- ➢ Expanding pool of people delivering health and care – but these workers are on low wages - versus high cost of housing (i.e., the relationship between demographic trends and labour supply).

Participant List

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Josephine Parish	Studland Parish Council
Vinia Abesamis	Herefordshire Council
Tim Hayward-Smith	CDA Herts
Stephen Brown	Bassetlaw District Council
Alan Wyle	Guildford Job Forum
Richard Quallington	Action with Communities in Rural England
Sarah Bradbury	Suffolk West Citizens Advice
Noel Wallis	East Hertfordshire District Council
Lucy Gallard	East Hertfordshire District Council
Rev'd Andrew Wilkinson	Church of England
Cllr Gill Heath	Staffordshire County Council
Cllr Gerry Lewin	Swale Borough Council
Jo Lavis	Rural Housing Solutions
Brian Wilson	Brian Wilson Associates
John Griffiths	Rocket Science
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