ANALYSIS OF RURAL SERVICES NETWORK CALL FOR EVIDENCE:

BUILDING THE BIG SOCIETY

Main findings

A survey has been run for the Rural Services Network (RSN) of its membership to gather evidence about the prospects for building the Big Society in rural England.

Principal local authorities view local (parish and town) councils, volunteers and charitable organisations as having a particularly important role, when it comes to helping them deliver public services in future.

Such organisations are seen as understanding local communities, being efficient and having reach into rural areas. However, there are concerns about the lack to funding to support them, their capacity and sustainability, and the possible fragmentation of service provision.

Significant numbers of rural principal local authorities operate a CLP protocol, third sector commissioning process, service delegation scheme, asset transfer scheme, volunteering strategy and co-production initiative – things which support the Big Society.

Over half the local (parish and town) councils are already delivering some service(s) to their communities. A sizeable minority said (some or all of) these were as a result of a service delegation scheme operated by their principal local authority, though most of these felt this only partly covered the real cost of running the service.

There is a fair, if not great, appetite among local councils for running more services and managing more assets. However, a large majority wish to have more of a say in the way that principal local authority services are run in their area.

Opinion is mixed over the extent to which local rural communities are ready to take on more of a role in service delivery for themselves. However, they exhibit some useful attributes. Most are seen by their local councils as having residents who are very or fairly active as local volunteers. A large majority can be categorised are broadly neighbourly.

Overall, there are some positive signals for the growth of local and civil society action in rural England. However, policy makers would be wise not to overlook certain challenges.

November 2010

This note reports the findings from a call for evidence (or survey) conducted of the Rural Services Network (RSN) membership, to explore the prospects for building the Big Society in rural England. Issues covered include what local authorities are doing to support it and whether rural communities are ready to do more.

The survey was designed and analysed by Brian Wilson Associates. The RSN distributed the survey to relevant groups within its membership.

Context and purpose

The Coalition Government has come into power placing great emphasis on its desire to build "the Big Society". It intends to devolve power to the most local level possible and it wants to see a more active civil society. This ambition sees individuals, communities and local bodies – including parish and town councils – helping to shape and deliver public services. Indeed, it is developing policies so that local communities can take on services marked for closure (the Right to Buy) and request to take over other services (the Right to Bid).

In many ways it might be thought that rural areas are well placed. They exhibit many of the right features and there are important building blocks in place – a very local governance tier (Parish and Town Councils), parish and town plans, community or village halls, support for community-run shops or pubs and so on. Moreover, survey data indicates that there is a stronger sense of community in rural than in urban areas. Yet this generalisation masks variation among rural communities and some societal trends may have weakened ties.

This survey was undertaken so the RSN can better understand how the Big Society might develop in rural England; where the main opportunities and challenges lie. The findings should be of interest to its partners, including the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, as they consider the rural dimension to national policy developments.

The survey

The survey ran from late October to early November 2010. Completion was online using Survey Monkey software. The survey form was kept short to encourage responses.

In practice two surveys were run. One was targeted at predominantly rural principal local authorities in RSN membership (a mix of district, county and unitary councils). This had a mix of closed and open questions. It elicited 41 responses. The other survey was targeted at parish and town council clerks and councillors. Given its wider circulation it comprised solely of closed questions. It elicited an impressive 810 responses.

Inevitably the findings come with a couple of 'health warnings'. First, the number of responses from principal local authorities, whilst quite good from that segment of RSN membership, is not large and so percentages must be treated with a little caution. Second, more generally the responses are from a self selected sample i.e. those who chose to complete the survey. It is always possible that some bias creeps in with such surveys.

Findings – the principal local authority perspective

The questions below were answered by 41 principal local authorities (though on certain questions a few had no information to add).

Q. How important do you consider each of the following will be over the next five years, as a means to help you deliver public services in your local area?

	Very important	Very or fairly important
Parish and town councils	61%	90%
Local volunteers	54%	85%
Charitable organisations	45%	83%
Community enterprises running services	34%	71%
Community trusts managing assets	29%	66%
Employee-run mutuals or enterprises	13%	53%

A majority of respondents considered each of these approaches to be either very or fairly important. However, parish and town councils were seen as the most important, with local volunteers and charitable organisations not far behind. Employee-run mutuals or enterprises are expected to play a smaller part than other approaches.

Q. In your view, are there reasons why the approaches listed above are particularly suited to service delivery in rural areas?
Various reasons were cited by respondents for the rural suitability of these types of approaches. They mainly fell into four categories:

> *Local understanding*: that these locally-based organisations understand the needs of individual rural communities and they can tailor services to meet the diversity of needs found at that scale;

Efficiency and cost-effectiveness: that pushing delivery down to the very local level can bring efficiencies and cost savings. The ability to enlist volunteer help was mentioned by some. Research on service delegations to local (parish and town) councils[1] offers some support for this view. What they lack in economies of scale, they may make up for in low overheads, input from volunteer labour and the use of less specified equipment;

Nature of rural communities: that rural communities are generally felt to be cohesive, with a strong sense of place. In the jargon, they have considerable social capital and thus have some capacity to play a role in services delivery;

Sparsity and peripherality: pragmatically, that adopting such approaches is the only way to maintain service "reach" into some of these communities. Self-help schemes and partnership working are a good way to address their distance from statutory provision.

A few comments were made relating to specific types of organisation. Parish and town councils were valued for their democratic credentials. Community land trusts were seen as particularly suited to the provision of affordable housing (though can be hard to set up).

Two additional comments were: not to overlook the local role of the ward councillor; and that local delivery approaches can also mean a reduced carbon footprint.

Q. In your view, are there reasons why the approaches listed above are particularly difficult or risky for service delivery in rural areas?
On the other hand respondents identified quite a few risks in pursuing these approaches to deliver services in rural areas. Most of the points raised can be categorised as follows:

Costs: there are few (diminishing?) resources left to support third sector bodies. This may be especially true in rural areas, given higher unit delivery costs;

Capacity: the most common response was that, in rural areas, many of these organisations are small and have limited capacity for service delivery. This was noted in terms of charities, community groups and local (parish and town) councils. Their size also makes them vulnerable to losses of key staff and means they may struggle to bid for service contracts. A number of respondents said they would require support or even a capacity-building programme;

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[1] *Guidance note: service delegations to parish and town councils* (CRC and NALC, 2009), by Brian Wilson Associates. Available at http://www.nalc.gov.uk/Publications/Booklets_and_Resources.aspx

Sustainability: many also said community groups and volunteering effort can be hard to sustain. Existing volunteers experience burn-out and it is hard to recruit. Some felt the rapidly ageing demographic of rural communities didn't help in terms of volunteer numbers or the range of issues they will engage with. It could prove hard to maintain service levels with a largely part-time and volunteer workforce;

Fragmentation: whilst not just a rural set of issues, some saw service delivery becoming more fragmented, with fewer economies of scale, duplication of effort and a new bureaucracy to manage contracts. Service delivery could lack strategic thinking and become NIMBY-ist. Services in the neediest communities may be most at risk, since those communities have the lowest capacity.

It should be added that three respondents stated there are no particular rural risks.

Q. Do you already operate any of the following in your area? Please answer yes if it's not actually called this, but is something very similar. Chart shows actual numbers out of 41.
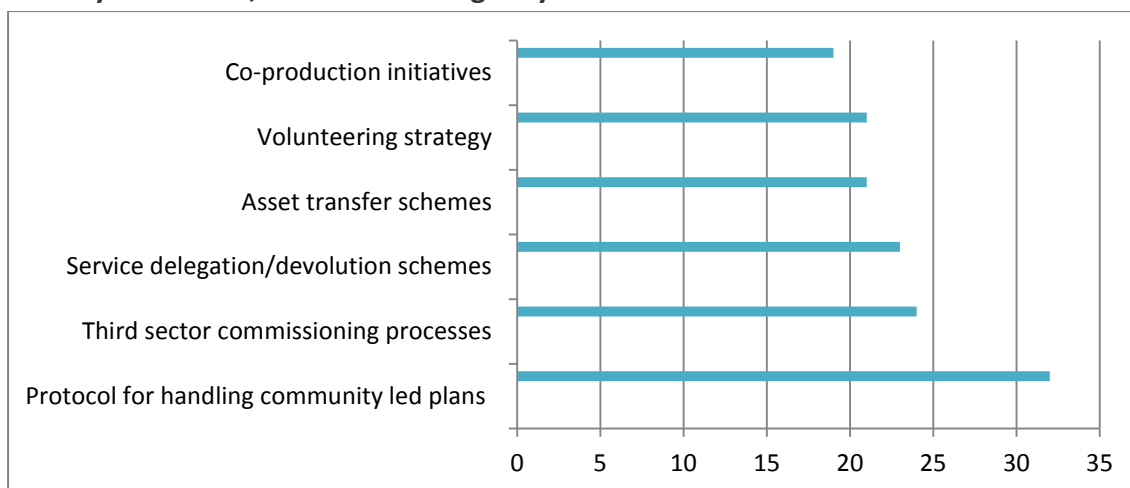
All the initiatives asked about in this question are to be found fairly widely – in about half or more of the responding local authority areas. The most common (in 32 out of 41) is a protocol for responding to communities which have developed parish or town action plans (community-led plans or CLP). This will often have been supported by the county-based Rural Community Councils. The answers show that a good deal of relevant local authority effort is already underway (or getting underway).

Some mentioned the gifting of assets – buildings or land – to local (parish and town) councils, development trusts and rural community groups, to enable them to manage services, such as libraries and the provision of affordable housing.

In addition, a number of local authorities referred to partnership arrangements at the very local level. Examples are Community Partnerships based upon market towns, Community

Engagement Forums to shape service delivery and Local Joint Committees which hold budgets and bring together service providers with parish and town councils.

Similarly, some mentioned the development of place-based approaches to service delivery. One was developing Place Plans for its market towns and surrounding areas, which will set out the resources, the infrastructure, existing CLP activity and community aspirations. Another said it was creating Locality Boards to oversee place-based service delivery. Yet another has appointed Place Portfolio holders from amongst its members' Executive.

A variety of grants schemes and service level agreements were noted, including one local authority with a Key Service Partnership Investment Scheme, providing a three year agreement with third sector organisations to deliver services that it does not.

Communities can also be encouraged to deliver information services. In one unitary council area communities run energy advice centres or information points. Elsewhere a volunteer run initiative, called Information Plus, operates in a market town and advises the local unemployed, to help them make informed choices and access wider support opportunities.

Q. How useful do you think the proposed Right-to-Buy and Right-to-Bid policies will be?
Local authority respondents fell into four groups, when it came to views on the Government's Right-to-Buy and Right-to-Bid proposals – policies that respectively allow communities to take over services faced with closure and to seek to manage other public services. The group views can be characterised as:

> *Wait and see*: this group (just under a third of respondents) remains neutral, saying it is too early to reach a view and they await further details about how these policies will operate;

> *Fully in favour*: this group (a fifth) think the policy will be useful and will help to empower local communities, so they can run services in ways which suit local needs;

> *In favour, with reservations*: this group (a quarter) are also broadly positive, but feel that success will depend (variously) on the availability of resources, volunteers, advice and support to communities, and a clear strategy;

> *Highly sceptical*: finally, this group (a quarter) don't believe that communities will be interested. Services being cut will be the least viable and especially so in rural areas. Community inertia and the liability that goes with running services are other factors that will undermine interest.

Findings – the parish and town council perspective

The section covers questions that were answered by 810 local (parish and town) councils – a mixture of clerks and councillors. Some of them skipped particular questions, so responses may not always add up to this figure.

Q. Does your parish or town council currently deliver some local services to its residents?

	Number	Percentage
No, it doesn't	368	46%
Yes, up to 3 services	329	41%
Yes, more than 3 services	108	13%

A small majority (54%) of the responding local councils do deliver certain services to their residents. As might be expected, given the size of many parish councils, they typically deliver no more than three types of service.

Q. Does your principal local authority have a 'delegation or devolution scheme', which allows parish and town councils to take on the delivery of certain services?

	Number	Percentage
Yes, it does	285	35%
No, it doesn't	221	28%
Don't know	296	37%

Delegation (or devolution) schemes are formal processes set up by principal local authorities through which local councils can apply to take on responsibility for managing a public service in their area[2]. Many respondents did not know the answer. However, it can be said that over a third of local council respondents are aware of such a scheme in their area. The difference between this answer and that given above by principal local authorities – a good half of whom ran such a scheme – may be explained partly by them responding from different locations and partly if some "don't knows" do have a scheme in their area.

Q. Are any of the services your parish or town council delivers now delegated or devolved services from the principal local authority?

	Number	Percentage
Yes, they are	211	27%
No, they're not	469	60%
Don't know	100	13%

This follow-up question shows that over a quarter of the local councils are delivering a service known to be part of a formal delegation (or devolution) scheme. A clear majority

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[2] Some are flexible schemes which allow local councils to do anything from taking full responsibility for operating the service, at the top end, through to simply helping monitor the service.

are not. The answers given here also seem to indicate that most of the "don't know" answers to the previous one were in fact "no's" i.e. they do not have a scheme in their area.

Q. If you answered 'yes' above, does the principal local authority fund the delegated or devolved services at a level which fully covers the costs? Chart shows percentages.
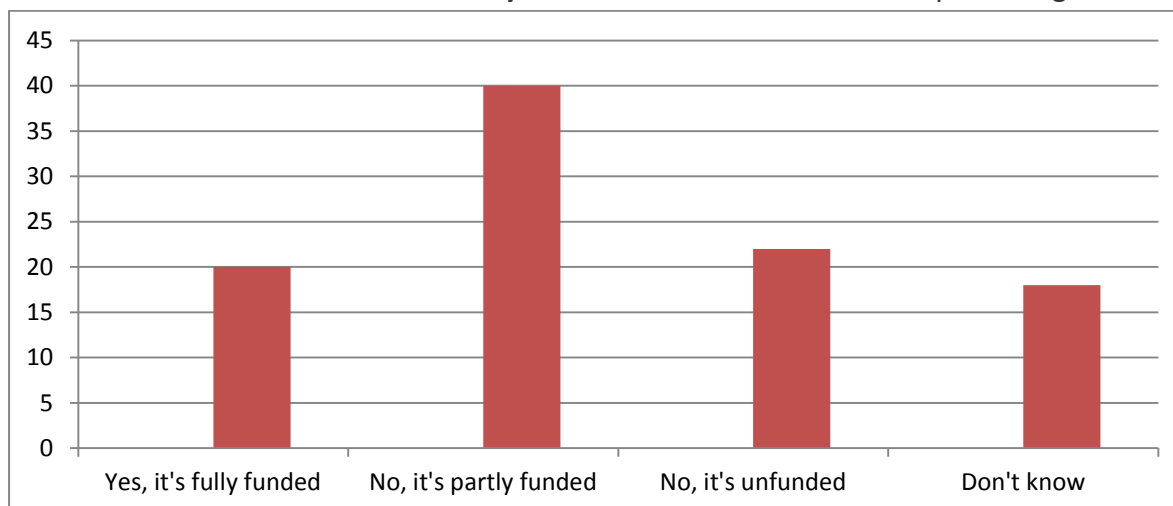

Only a minority believe that their area's delegation scheme is fully covering their service delivery costs. The most common answer is that it partly covers costs. Other research by the author indicates that it is often the overhead (administrative) costs which go unfunded.

Q. Would your parish or town council like to do more of any of the following?

|	% saying yes	% saying no
Deliver services currently run by the principal authority	37%	63%
Have more say in how principal authority services are run	83%	17%
Run services additional to those by the principal authority	37%	63%
Own/manage assets currently with the principal authority	22%	78%

The survey now turns to the capacity and willingness of local communities and their representatives to build the Big Society. Answers to this question show that there is a fair appetite among the local councils sector for taking on further service responsibilities. However, this should not be over-stated. The only way in which a majority of respondents wished their local council to become more involved was by having a greater say in the way that principal local authority services are delivered in their area. Over four in five were keen to do this. Opportunities, at least, for engaging with local councils are therefore strong.

Q. To what extent would you say residents in your community are active locally as volunteers? Chart shows percentages of those responding.
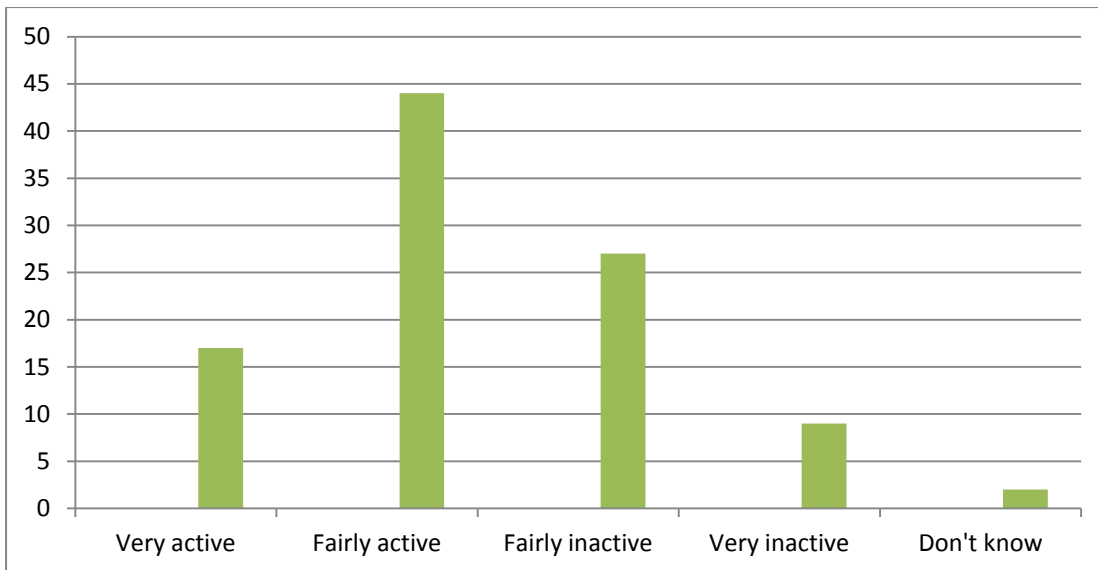
A number of local authorities in this survey have noted that encouraging more volunteering may prove difficult. This question finds that around 60% of the local (parish and town) council respondents consider their communities to be either very or fairly active in terms of local volunteering. Of course, current volunteering levels are not necessarily a sound barometer of future levels and whether increased volunteering can be expected.

Q. To what extent would you say residents in your local community support each other as neighbours? Chart shows percentages of those responding.
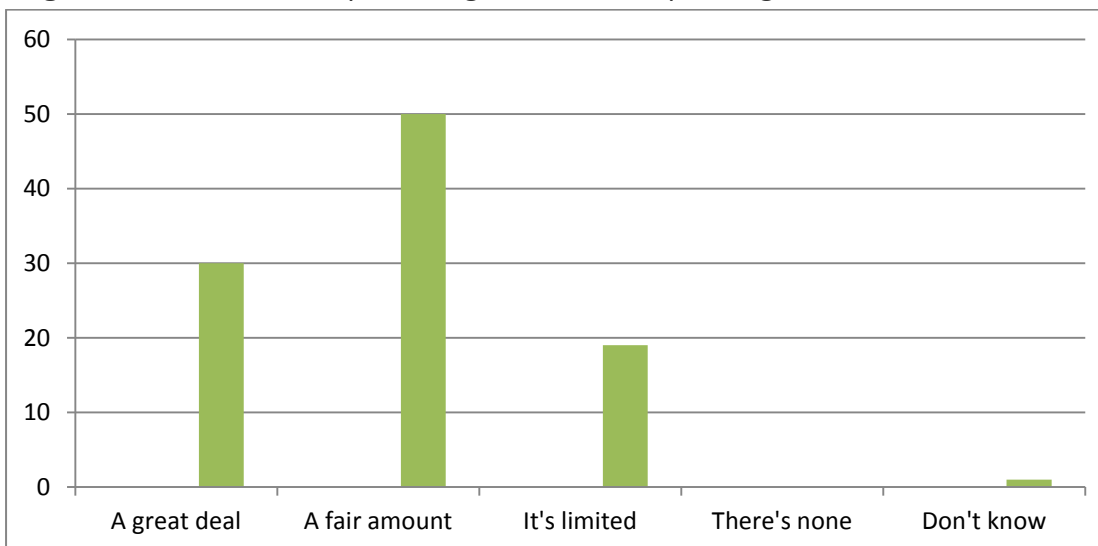
Informal and day-to-day actions by people are equally important to a Big Society, not least where neighbours look out for each other. On the whole this question shows that rural communities are seen as supportive and neighbourly by their local councils. Some 80% of respondents felt that neighbours either support each other a 'great deal' or a 'fair amount'. This appears to confirm the view expressed by some principal local authorities that their rural communities are relatively cohesive.

Q. Do you consider that local people have the capacity to take on the management of some local services as community-run services e.g. a shop, a pub?

	Number	Percentage
Yes, they do	303	38%
No, they don't	224	28%
Not sure	271	34%

Local council opinion is divided about the capacity of their communities to manage more services for themselves, no doubt reflecting the considerable variety amongst the communities they represent. This could be said to imply that community responses to the expected reductions in service provision by the public sector will be patchy. Nonetheless, almost four in ten local councils feel confident that their community can do more.

Q. Does your parish or town council area have its own Parish Plan or Town Plan?
Finally, a question was asked about community led planning (CLP) or more specifically the existence of parish or town action plans. Broadly in line with figures quoted elsewhere[3], slightly over half (56%) said that their community had such a plan. The wide spread of CLP in rural England should offer a strong building block, since it is a process which identifies priorities for local communities and then encourages them to take action where they can.

Some concluding comments

In terms of building the Big Society in rural England, this survey has found some positive features, including:
- Many rural communities are believed to have considerable social capital, measured in terms of things like local volunteering and neighbourliness;
- There is a real appetite among local (parish and town) councils to help shape service delivery by principal local authorities;
- Local councils, volunteers, charitable organisations and the like are seen by principal local authorities as being able to play an important part in service delivery;
- A good number of these principal local authorities have things in place, such as CLP protocols, third sector commissioning processes and service delegation schemes;

On the other hand, this survey has found some things which may limit aspirations for the Big Society in rural England, including:
- There are clear indications that rural communities vary a lot in terms of their capacity and appetite to play a role in service delivery. Strong social capital is not universal and some places could be left behind;

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[3] ACRE says that some 4,000 communities have already undertaken a community planning exercise.

- A more active rural civil society could be held back by the rural cost premium, and the capacity and sustainability of small rural organisations;
- Nearly half of local councils still don't play a role in service provision and most don't wish to take on (more) services or assets from their principal local authority. Un-funded or under-funded delegation schemes will discourage some;
- What happens next may depend upon the extent to which advice, support and resources can be made available to civil society organisations in rural areas.

In short, there is real potential to build the Big Society in rural areas, but policy makers should not overlook certain challenges if they expect this potential to be realised.

Brian Wilson Associates
November 2010