

Rural Services Network

3rd Sounding Board Survey

“Rural Priorities for Government Action”

A recent sounding board survey asked for views on what priorities the new Government should give, during its first 100 days, to a range of rural issues. It also sought opinions about the availability of additional voluntary capacity and barriers to volunteering.

In total there were 136 responses from Parish Councillors but unfortunately just 11 from other Local Authority Councillors (which cannot therefore be assumed to be a representative sample).

The first question asked respondents to attribute a level of importance from Low to Very High to each of 14 rural issues.

In terms of ‘very high’ and ‘high’ importance issues the Local Authority responses prioritised Broadband, Social Care and Social/Local needs housing, in that order, whilst the Parish responses also gave Broadband and the Social Care as top concerns followed by Local Schools, Local Hospitals, and GP Surgeries.

The table below gives the percentages of responses ranking each issue either as ‘High’ or ‘Very High’

	LA Councillor responses	Parish Councillor responses
Building more general market homes	38	29
Building more social/ local needs housing	85	53
Broadband speed and reliability	100	79
Improving public transport	54	60
Local GP surgeries	69	71
Local hospital services	69	71
Protecting or enhancing the natural / built environment	38	67
Road building/ highways maintenance	69	67
Securing the future of rural Post Offices	54	62
Social care provision	92	74
Supporting local schools	54	71
Supporting retention of village shops	77	58
Supporting retention of village pubs	31	23
Addressing fuel poverty	31	46

Both groups put Broadband as their highest priority and Social Care second. However, there were some notable differences between the two groups with Parish responses giving lower priority to additional housing and expressing a stronger concern about protecting or enhancing the natural/built environment.

Supporting village pubs did not score highly with either group. This might reflect a view that retaining pubs is comparatively less important or possibly it might suggest that, as commercial undertakings, the scope for government intervention is thought to be more limited. Addressing fuel poverty was, perhaps surprisingly, considered a high or very high priority in only a minority of responses. Possibly this might be due to the issue being less conspicuous in the community, less well understood or indeed simply reflect that this survey was undertaken in May and June.

When asked about how much additional volunteer capacity might realistically be available in their local communities to assist with service provision the parish responses were significantly less optimistic than those from Local Authority Councillors as illustrated below.

Assessments of additional volunteer capacity (%)

	LA Councillor responses	Parish Councillor responses
None	0	7
Very Limited	15	58
Moderate	69	19
A lot	15	5

In response to a question about selected factors that might limit the capacity for further volunteering within their community ‘busy lifestyles (including family and work)’ was considered most important followed by ‘too much being expected of volunteers/ lack of support’ and, thirdly, ‘reluctance to undertake long term commitments’. Several responses noted that a number of additional factors are involved including the age of existing volunteers; Health and Safety or other legal concerns; feelings of being exploited by/disenchantment with the Big Society; and erosion of community spirit.

Certainly the 65% of Parish responses indicating either none or very limited additional volunteer capacity does not bode well for the further transfer of services from the public sector.