

Rural Manifesto 2009/10 – response from East Devon District Council

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the consultation on rural services in order to create a new manifesto for rural area. Having collected the views from a number of relevant Members and officers our response is as follows.

Before responding to the specific areas covered in the consultation I would wish to make some general points please:

Many aspects of the services and costs that are normally expected of us by central government, are extrapolated from urban models and targets. This approach breaks down when we look at the real experience of providing services in our rural communities. A different sort of model is required, rather than just doing more of the usual urban approach in an outreach way. The usual assumptions about travel, about economies of scale, about the principle costs in providing services, about community needs and expectations, demographics, costs of living, statistical approaches all work in a different way in rural communities compared to urban settlements. i.e. Rural communities are not just urban communities separated by more fields!

As intimated above, a critical element when looking at rural communities is 'the numbers problem'. Due to low densities, hotspots of issues are less visible and therefore often remain under-addressed. Because costs of services to address issues are relatively high compared to population numbers services normally provided in an urban setting are seen as uneconomic or profligate against usual benchmarks when applied to rural communities. Thus the stereotypes of rural idyll, country estates, holiday atmosphere, affluence, poor economies of scale, country sports, and outmoded ways of life, get in the way of tackling the rural problems and allowing rural communities to make a major contribution to resolving national issues. A different national mindset is required.

The issue of 'relative' rather than 'absolute' deprivation relates to many of our rural communities. (Deprived people living cheek by jowl with extremely wealthy people camouflages the true picture, and means that services can be skewed to the needs of those with loudest voices and highest ability)

In rural communities distance and density of population affects community-reliant businesses such as local shops (including Post Offices) and pubs in a rural setting. In an urban setting it is more possible to remain viable by capturing a niche need within the wider community, and therefore manage to weather the fluctuations in the economy, fashion, taste, and demand. The customer base for a community-reliant local business is often far smaller and more differentiated, thus requiring less units of a wider range of goods, as well as facing higher risks with perishables, higher transport and energy costs etc. These can all result in abnormal costs of local goods. Unless national policy tackles these peculiarities of the rural situation communities in the countryside are destined to becoming dysfunctional dormitories for an incoming affluent population, thus losing their vibrancy, tradition, and social capital. They would become living museums, or pastiches of rural life, rather than living, developing and working places.

Rural Proofing

Whilst rural proofing (like equalities proofing) is a useful tool, without some grit it will remain a matter of mere exhortation. A legal duty to ensure equality of opportunity for rural residents would be far more powerful.

Rural Economy

See my introductory comments.

As suggested in your consultation paper the character of rural economy is not a mere extension of urban economy, it has its own special characteristics and constraints. The continuing national focus on providing for SME scale business (often part of national or regional chains with low average wages), overlooks the opportunities to incentivise specialist micro-business and rurally related businesses being established in rural locations, often enhancing the sense of place of our rural communities. We need specific rural business enterprise expertise and a focus on the rural potential.

Supporting rural communities

In a time of financial difficulty there may be less ability for the government to allocate more resources. An alternative is to allow communities more flexibility to shape their own destiny, and draw upon their own skills and other resources. Handing down professional support, legal flexibilities, information, influence, and funding opportunities to rural (indeed all) communities in order to allow local choices, and development, based on local public would seem a sound alternative. This will lock in community engagement, community assets, and create dialogue and social capital. This will allow action to be locally prioritised around some of the issues raised in the paper and follows the principles of Asset Based Community Development proposed by McKnight et al. A development of the existing Sustainable Communities Act might also be appropriate in this respect.

Whilst Post Office closures have created a focus around rural services it is of course not only the Post Office itself which is being missed, it is the types of services and community focus which it provided. The battle for rural post offices should still be fought and pressure should be put upon the government to allow POs to operate new national services in order to remain viable.

However where rural post offices are lost we need to lobby government about replacement of the benefits they provided.

Central government funding formulae

The consultation paper clearly sets out the issues relating to the inadequacies of the funding approach, and I have set out (above) our comments on the inappropriateness of reliance on an 'economies of scale' approach when tackling rural services.

Small rural schools

See my introductory comments about the 'numbers problem'. If successive governments persist with their 'economies of scale' obsession they will lose the differentiation and sense of place for which our rural communities are most valued. It seems remarkable that in our current technological age small rural schools cannot act as community outreach arms of larger urban schools ('hub and spoke' model) rather than each school's resources being separately based on capitation. The confederation approach is already being trialled.

Affordable rural housing

National Planning guidance requires careful alteration to permit cross subsidy of affordable rural housing from new market-price housing. 'Second homes' rules need to come into force to sensitively and appropriately limit the amount of cheaper existing rural houses being lost to the holiday market. HACA subsidy rules need to be sensitive to the specific needs and special costs of developing rural affordable homes. We have previously submitted evidence on rural affordable housing which we would be happy to forward.

The need for retaining rural mixed income communities must be recognised nationally if we are to make best use of our rural developments and ensure that they remain vibrant and sustainable communities.

Rural Healthcare

Recognition that the mental, social, and physical aspects of health are different in rural settings

Recognition that tackling community health is not necessarily the same as just tackling a collation of individual health needs

The constraints of the current health system which must be addressed in order to respond to the rural challenge: including the fact that we cannot rely on the usual mantra of 'economies of scale' when dealing with rural issues, the issue of GP and other contracts potentially creating inflexibility for rural challenges, the centralisation of providers and commissioners etc.

Future-proofing health services as the nature of the rural life changes rapidly, ...and how a mere shift of funding will not tackle this with dwindling resources and escalating expectation

Where is the Health Agencies' role in helping the community themselves to generate a more healthy society?

There is an issue that each rural community itself will be different (rurality may be less homogeneous than urban life) . How do we create a system that is flexible to local needs, resources and 'flavours' , and the way these change over time.

There needs to be recognition that rurality itself is not the sole issue in rural health, it is the specific mix we have: e.g. of rurality, low wage economy, population dispersion, low diversity, cost of living, outsiders perception of rural idyll (generated by tourism), age profile etc.

Rural Transport

An equal opportunities requirement for rural residents would help resolve this issue! (see above). Clearly the government's policy on free bus travel is not rurality proofed and the discriminatory effect against the tax payers in rural areas needs to be addressed.

Digital Britain

Not only broadband but also mobile phone reception will severely affect the usability and attraction of rural settings for use as businesses and homes. If the government are determined to (appropriately and sensitively) exploit the use of more areas to meet the needs of a growing population, and climate change, this issue has to be tackled.

Fuel poverty

Whilst gas supply is a rural issue there is no guarantee that this is going to remain the most favourable energy source. As such there should be a government incentive particularly aimed at rural areas for installation of other sustainable energy sources. These may be solar, wind, geothermal, microhydro, or biomass etc . as locally appropriate. Combined Heat and Power may also be an option for more compact medium sized settlements. Perhaps installing the infrastructure for these alternatives will be as economic as extending gas networks.

General

What is required for all settlements (both rural and urban) is a national statement of minimum and universal provision for all communities, reflecting those things necessary to create a basic quality of life for all sectors of our community. This will reduce the current inequality and arbitrariness of service which is prevalent even in our larger rural settlements

I hope that these comments and suggestions are useful to you.

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