Strong Counties and Vibrant Rural Communities

Report of the Rural Issues Task Group

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March 2007

Introduction

About the CCN

The County Councils Network (CCN) is a Special Interest Group within the Local Government Association (LGA), with all 37 English Shire Counties in membership. The County Councils Network promotes the voice of counties within the LGA and the values and interests of the English Counties. Together these authorities represent 48% of the population of England and provide services across 87% of its land area.

The County Councils Network is an organisation led by our elected members, and Task Groups are established within the CCN to look at issues of particular importance to counties. One of these is the Rural Issues Task Group, chaired by Councillor Doris Ansari (Cornwall) and including members from counties across rural England.

Following the completion of the Task Group's work in the 2001-5 electoral cycle, which focused on an analysis of issues arising from the 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak, the CCN Council asked the Task Group to undertake further work on rural issues with a view to preparing a detailed issues paper which would highlight:

• From a county council perspective, the key issues facing rural communities
• Examples of good practice already initiated by one or more CCN member authorities which have sought to respond to these challenges

This paper is the result of that work, and the Task Group gratefully acknowledges the help, advice and support of CCN member counties, members, staff and partner organisations in the work which has lead up to it. While the paper looks at rural issues from a local government, and specifically county council, perspective, the Task Group is clear that building a sustainable future for the countryside requires the involvement of central government, all tiers of local government, other public service providers, the voluntary sector, businesses, both small and large, and not least the engagement and will of rural residents themselves.

Addressing Rural Issues

Any debate on rural issues will begin with the question of which areas are rural, and which are not. Various definitions exist, even across government. The view of the Task Group was that for the purposes of this report we should accept self-identity, acknowledging that this will mean some areas of the South-East will describe themselves as rural which would be considered quite densely populated

if they were to be transported to the North-West. Likewise that some market towns will be regarded as the most urban area of one county, while similar settlements may be viewed as deeply rural in another.

In this sense, the twin-track definition used by the Commission for Rural Communities, of recognising that the size of a settlement can be separated from the question of whether the wider area around it is more or less sparse, is also a useful one. The nature of rural issues is such that population density – within the settlement or the wider area – will tend to be a crucial factor when particular challenges arise.

It should also be noted that even within similar settlements there are significant differences, and overall the countryside is going through a period of significant change in living and working patterns, and in methods of accessing services. In this context it is important that policy-makers have regard to solutions which will help resolve the problems of tomorrow's countryside, and meeting the likely needs of future rural residents insofar as we can anticipate them, as well as solving today's problems.

A Countryside Agency report[1] identified the key questions for the future of the countryside as being around who would live in the countryside (numbers and demographics), how rural people would earn their living, and what would impact on quality of life. Of course these encompass a range of further issues, and four "future scenarios" were suggested, with the key factors being levels of social cohesion and levels of environmental sustainability.

The suggested futures were: "The Countryside Means Business", with a socially fragmented, environmentally unsustainable (but economically prosperous) future; "Go for Green", with less economic prosperity, lower social cohesion, but higher environmental sustainability; "All on Board", with high levels of social cohesion, but low environmental sustainability, and "The triple whammy", where a change in the economics of the countryside enables prosperity to be combined with social cohesion and environmental sustainability.

In looking at these possible futures it is important to remember not only that the most likely outcome is some compromise between the four, but also that different outcomes are possible in different types of rural area, and indeed between similar types of rural area in different locations.

When talking about these challenges it should be stressed that, for most residents, the countryside is a pleasant place to live - indeed under 10% of residents in sparse areas say that if they moved, they would prefer it to be to a

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[1] *The State of the Countryside 2020*, 2003, Countryside Agency

city or large town[2]. However, the vision of the 'English rural idyll' can mask serious need and deprivation, both in income terms, and in terms of access to services. Despite the popular image of the countryside, average incomes are ten per cent lower than in urban areas, and manufacturing represents a higher proportion of employment[3].

Two major drivers of government policy over recent years have been the concepts of contestability and personalisation. That is to say, a greater requirement that public services demonstrate that they could not adequately be delivered through a private contractor, or the voluntary sector, and an aspiration that individuals receive services more specifically tailored to their particular requirements. Attempts to enhance personalisation are often driven through what has become known as the 'choice and voice' agenda – in some cases personalisation may be seen as the policy 'end', and contestability as the delivery 'means'.

At the same time, the post-1997 response in Government has been to define the problems of the countryside as being, essentially, the same as the problems of the town. Indeed for many, this is the case – access to high-quality healthcare and education, security from crime and the fear of crime, and the need for affordable high-quality housing – for others, life in the country presents particular challenges – isolation, lack of adequate transport, poor career opportunities, and the threat of specifically rural crime.

While the aspirations to deliver services more efficiently and with greater regard for the wishes of the individual services users are ones which are widely shared amongst public servants, this policy direction looks very different from a rural perspective than an urban one. Post office closures and the withdrawal of particular services from Post Office Counters, for instance, may be seen in urban areas as enhancing choice by allowing individuals to choose different providers and means of service delivery. In rural areas however, they can be a devastating blow to a community, particularly those in income poverty, with limited mobility, or with no private transport. The protection of existing services, in function if not in form, is as important, if not more so, to many rural communities as the availability of new services.

Delivering 'choice' in public services is a particular challenge in rural areas, for a range of reasons, the main ones among which were outlined by the Commission for Rural Communities[4] as being: The practicality of offering choice when it is difficult for one service provider to be financially viable; the reality of choice when services are distant from one another and from users; the financial and

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[2] *State of the Countryside Survey*, 2006 Commission for Rural Communities/IPSOS MORI
[3] *Rural Economies – Exploding the myths*, 2002, Countryside Agency
[4] *The Choice and Voice Agenda*, 2006, Commission for Rural Communities

opportunity costs of travel; the lack of market competition due to unprofitability; the different role of the voluntary sector in rural areas; the level of access to information and support in making choices; the risk of closure to existing services; the impact of choice on sustainable communities through unforeseen consequences – for instance where a new way of delivering a service results in the withdrawal of the old way for those who still wish to use it, or lower numbers choosing a local school means it can no longer act as a centre for the community as well as an educational centre.

The Fens Rural Pathfinder has an 'access to services' strand specifically designed to look at whether the challenge noted above is causing a 'digital divide' where modern methods of service delivery fail to reach a particular section of the population, but the cost of traditional methods increases, and these are therefore not mainstreamed. Particular solutions being examined include 'events' or 'fairs', at which all those providers and agencies involved in supporting a particular group in the community are brought together in one place at a particular time, and more effective data-sharing and referral procedures, to reduce the costs of contact and increase the appropriateness of services.

This report does not claim to address all the issues which are

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ACCESS TO SERVICES IN SHROPSHIRE

Delivering services to deeply rural communities such as those found in Shropshire is one of the County Council's greatest challenges. But it is a challenge that the Council and partners have prioritised and which is being tackled alongside local communities.

The Council sees the access challenge in terms of an "Access Jigsaw" – that is, identifying the relevant services to meet the needs of individual communities and improving how people get to use those services through a mixture of transport solutions (be it voluntary/community transport or public sector transport) and finding innovative ways of delivering services closer to where people live. An essential element of this jigsaw is building an understanding of community needs and their capacity to influence the development of appropriate solutions.

Community development activities have very heavily influenced the access agenda in Shropshire, either by building on the outcomes of the parish planning process or through local scrutiny. By bringing together local people and relevant service providers a huge amount of understanding has been transferred about local priorities and needs and how to improve service delivery. For example, this activity has directly influenced how information about local transport services and travel options can be communicated more locally in the future...

important in rural England. In particular some topics have been deliberately omitted, not because the task group does not consider them to be important, but either because they could take up a whole report themselves, or because specialist bodies have already made strong contributions to the debate, which we would endorse. Notable absences from this report, therefore, include the future of farming and agricultural regulation[5], land management, and the provision of rural public transport – regarding which the Task Group would simply note the importance of the provision to the public of information about such public transport as already exists.

...Building on the back of a network of 35 rurally based "Broadplaces" – broadband connected community venues, Shropshire County Council is now trialling a range of "remote delivery pilots" as a way of delivering services as locally to rural communities as possible. For example a trained "Customer First Officer" will be located at various Broadplaces for 2 hours per week, at a time when the venue is bustling, to offer access to a range of County Council and partner services. Also secure web cam equipment is being used to deliver Citizen's Advice Bureau services and a trial of transactional based video conferencing is soon to get underway. All of the trials will be thoroughly evaluated and opportunities to mainstream identified.

Innovative access activities in Shropshire, whilst having been initiated by the Shropshire Rural Pathfinder, are now operating under the management of the Shropshire Access Partnership. This formal structure facilitates discussion regarding access issues through Shropshire's Local Strategic Partnership and integrates access initiatives within the county's Community Strategy and LAA activity.

There appears in fact to be a gap between the priorities of politicians and the priorities of local people, in terms of defining rural priorities. Members of Parliament felt the major policy issues to be Farming, Housing, Public Transport, Education, and Farm Diversification, in that order. Rural residents prioritised Public Transport, Law and Order, Farming, Healthcare, and Young People[6].

The Task Group welcomes the formal establishment of the Commission for Rural Communities as a cross-departmental advocate and watchdog, and a reduction in the extent to which the rural-proofing role is seen as simply applicable to DEFRA. The Comprehensive Spending Review in 2007 will provide one opportunity to see how effectively these new

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[5] Though the Rural Issues Task Group stands by the conclusions and recommendations it has previously expressed on the handling of the FMD outbreak of 2001.

[6] *Rural Insights – Assessing the views, concerns and priorities of rural England*, 2006, Commission for Rural Communities/ Ipsos MORI

arrangements work in practice, and the early submission to the pre-budget report from the Commission for Rural Communities[7] is a positive sign for the level of likely engagement in this process, though it is important that the benefits of rural proofing are spread more widely across the work of Government and, no less vitally, non-governmental organisations and government agencies.

The Task Group also supports the work of the Rural Pathfinder Programme, and with Rural Pathfinders covering Dorset, the Fens (including parts of Cambridgeshire and Norfolk), Hampshire, Humber (including the East Riding of Yorkshire), Lancashire (with the active engagement of Cumbria), West Durham, Shropshire and the Peak District (including parts of Derbyshire and Staffordshire), CCN Member authorities can rightly state that they are fully involved in this project, which aims to test;

- Ways of achieving more joined up delivery of services in rural areas, addressing economic, social and environmental issues through a partnership approach.
- Innovation in rural development and delivery of services in rural areas, building as appropriate on existing best practice.
- Better prioritisation of existing resources, in line with local priorities, towards areas, communities and people with greatest needs.

March 2007

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[7] 2006 Pre-Budget Report, Commission for Rural Communities' Policy Proposals

Crime, the Fear of Crime, and Community Safety

While crime is, on average, lower in rural than in urban areas, it is still a significant factor affecting the lives of rural residents. Even in hamlets, villages and isolated dwellings there were 175 burglaries and 570 vehicle-related thefts per 10,000 households in the statistical year 2004-5, and 337 acts of violence per 10,000 adults. Rates of violence against the person are increasing more rapidly in rural areas - and have more than doubled in the 13 most rural police force areas, rising by 126 per cent between 1998 and 2006[8].

Becoming a victim of crime in a rural area can have a very different impact from becoming a victim in an urban area. In particular, in an area which is normally low in crime, the victim of a serious and personal crime is likely to face a much greater level of shock and more abrupt change in fear levels - rural victimisation can have a higher community impact through greater local media coverage. It is also possible that there will be less local support for those suffering due to rural crime, as a result of the absence of a 'critical mass' of victims, and a less local police presence, as the force focus their efforts on areas of higher crime.

Victims may need to travel great distances to access support. For example, the lack of rural Domestic Violence refuges and support may mean relocating to an urban area away from existing family and community networks. The Domestic Violence Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI 225), while predominantly aimed at district and borough level, impacts on County Councils and other agencies in requiring education and support programmes for victims and offenders. This is particularly challenging where a Countywide approach would be more beneficial than a district one – very much the case in rural areas.

These factors can lead to isolation and loss of confidence in the ability of the authorities to deal with crime, and cause some repeat victims to take the law into their own hands. Lower capacity levels for public services to respond to crime can also mean that in some areas low-level offending is tolerated for longer, meaning that the problem is more serious when it is addressed, and therefore harder, and more expensive, to resolve.

Many rural areas are close-knit and therefore self-reliant. This means that there is a perception that 'ordinary crime' is committed by those travelling in to the area to commit it. This is particularly true in those communities where the nature of the community would lead to higher detection rates of local criminals. However for some crimes, this can work against the police in their attempts at detection, in particular for those crimes which some members of the public do not consider 'real crime', such as poaching, fuel tax evasion, or wildlife crime.

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[8] Daily Telegraph, 29/06/06

The relative priority given to distinctly 'rural crime' is a question which has not yet been fully addressed.

The 1998 Crime and Disorder Act created statutory Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) at local District or Borough area. This has created particular challenges for County Councils who must work within a framework of multiple CDRPs. The 1998 Act also created Youth Offending Teams which typically operate at County level. The Government's Drug Strategy is delivered by Drug Action Teams, again which typically operate at County level.

In 2004, the Government established Local Criminal Justice Boards at Police Force level. Guidance issued in 2005 emphasises the importance of joint CDRP/LCJB working, particularly in relation to Prolific Offenders, Domestic Violence and Community Engagement.

All CDRPs are required to support the national PSA1 target to reduce volume crime (a menu of offences including burglary, vehicle crime, violent crime and criminal damage) by 15% in England and Wales by April 2008. For many rural CDRPs this is challenging, particularly where crime levels are low, as the effect of a small number of offenders can dramatically affect the local performance.

For example in Sheffield, 95% of those convicted of 'taking without consent' were from within Sheffield, whereas in Hambleton

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CASE STUDY - NORTHUMBERLAND

The Berwick CDRP area has a total population of 26,000 with the town of Berwick-upon-Tweed having a population of 12,000. There are a number of holiday centres and caravan parks, the two largest of these have 23,000 people staying at any one time between April and September. Alcohol related violence is a core priority for the CDRP and the ENOUGH initiative targets policing, licensing, education etc in a coordinated campaign.

Transport is a key issue, for example there are only 54 licensed taxis within the borough area, which increases the risk of disorder when nightclubs close at 2.00am and fast food outlets at 3.00am. The initiative has led to a decrease in a range of measures compared to the 2003/2004 base line.

- Violent Crime   -47%
- Incidents in/around Licensed Premises   -52%
- Public Order Offences   -14%
- Affray   -36%

District (of North Yorkshire) 63% were from outside the County[9]. These statistics are, however, strongly affected by whether a rural area has a significant urban area on its boundary – many of those committing offences in Hambleton coming from areas of Cleveland, which adjoins it to the North. Overall, most crime remains local.

Another major issue in rural areas is the particular vulnerability to arson of some types of settlement and industry, with outlying farm buildings often filled with flammable material. This is a significant problem – 40% of businesses which suffer arson attacks never trade successfully again[10].

The 2002 Police Reform Act created the ability to merge smaller partnerships and merge Drug Action Teams. While this has taken place in some Shire areas, the realities of two-tier working have made this a slower process than in some other areas. The recently published review of the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act is suggesting a County level strategic partnership with the operational delivery being at District or Borough level. CCN have carried out considerable work to influence this agenda via the Crime and Disorder Task Group, including through communication with the Home Office and representation on the working groups at national level.

In addition, Counties seem to vary in experience of effectiveness of Parish and Town Council engagement in Crime and Disorder issues. Parish Councils are bound by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act which requires them to consider the Crime and Disorder implications of their decisions in the same way that County and District Councils are. Parish Councils do have the ability to raise precept specifically for Crime Prevention activities under the Local Government and Rating Act 1997.

The Task Group recognises that there is a conflict in public attitudes to the use of police staff – there is a desire that police buildings remain open and staffed, even in relatively small settlements, but the public also want to see officers out 'on the beat' and pro-actively tackling crime in other ways. One way of attempting to reach a compromise is to harness improvements in technology to enable greater flexibility in where 'police work' is done, and to reduce the burden of the administrative and civilian workload on uniformed officers, enabling them to spend more time in their local communities, providing both action against crime and 'visible reassurance'.

Other technological progress which has helped in the fight against crime includes Automatic Number Plate Recognition Systems. These are being successfully introduced by a number of rural forces to cover key arterial routes and therefore

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[9] *The 'road to nowhere': the evidence for traveling criminals* Home Office Research Study 207

[10] *Crime Reduction Toolkit: Arson.* Home Office

tackle travelling criminals. The Task Group is concerned by suggestions[11] that these may be operating outside the framework of the laws on surveillance, and urges the Government and police forces to work together to ensure that the benefits are not lost in any necessary reform.

Rural policing is a constant area for debate however, and was brought sharply into focus over 2006, with the Government's proposal to create a smaller number of strategic forces. Parliamentary debates in relation to the Police and Justice Bill that underpins this have frequently referred to fears that rural policing may suffer at the expense of Forces moving resource to higher crime urban areas, and at the moment the proposals appear to have been shelved.

The Government is rolling out a national neighbourhood policing strategy in which every neighbourhood is promised a local policing resource. In London, this means a named team in every local authority ward in every Borough.

Clearly this will not be sustainable in many rural areas, and the application of the 'neighbourhood policing' concept to sparsely populated areas needs further exploration.

Related to this are issues surrounding Police Community Support Officers - both in terms the projected increase in their numbers and the interaction between PCSOs, traditional police officers, and existing warden schemes in rural areas. Local Authority warden schemes have been established in many rural areas, but instability of funding has caused a number of schemes to finish or reduce in size. The LGA highlighted this issue in a recent spending review submission.

> **CASE STUDY – MOBILE POLICE STATIONS**
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> Gloucestershire Constabulary has three Mobile Police Stations that cover the Forest of Dean, North and East Gloucestershire areas. Officers providing the mobile service visit villages on a prearranged schedule.
>
> The service allows residents to raise local issues whilst providing additional services such as crime reduction advice, Neighbourhood and Rural Watch news as well as a property marking service.
>
> The Mobile Police Stations provide an opportunity for less mobile residents to meet an officer, discuss concerns and pass on and receive information of interest. This enhanced contact with the community is designed to provide reassurance as well as to assist in the reduction of the fear of crime.

The Task Group believes that in some areas it would be appropriate to address this by ensuring that partnership working delivers a flexible role for community wardens, potentially under the direction of parish councils, while retaining police

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[11] *Annual Report of the Chief Surveillance Commissioner to the Prime Minister and to Scottish Ministers for 2005-6*

accreditation where relevant. These local wardens would work across the range of 'quality of life' issues in their parish, for instance monitoring faulty public equipment (checking lifebelts near a canal for example, or reporting dangerous footpaths) as well supporting the fight against crime. There is some support for this from parishes themselves - one Parish Councillor says;

"As a rural quality parish council on the edge of a county it would be useful to have greater flexibility to appoint (in partnership with appropriate agencies) a single person who would get to know local people and act as the person on the ground for a number of agencies.

The current alternative is to have lots (though probably not enough) of people with separate responsibilities trying to cover lots of rural parishes. This may be fine for the agencies, but is not very customer focused. In my

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CASE STUDY – TACKLING CRIME IN SHROPSHIRE

The latest findings from the West Mercia Crime and Safety Survey (October 2006) show that fear of crime in Shropshire has reduced significantly since 2005, in particular in relation to property (including household burglary) and vehicle crime.

97% of residents feel safe in their neighbourhoods during the day and 87% feel safe after dark. People living in the more rural areas generally feel safer than those people living in the market towns. Actual experience of crime has fallen significantly from 18% in 2005 to 14% in 2006.

Since 2003/4 recorded crimes (British Crime Survey) have reduced from 11966 to 9926, almost a19% reduction. A number of factors have helped achieve this;

- Despite difficulties of working across local government boundaries in a rural area, partnership working has been very effective and agencies have formed a common front in the fight against crime,
- Effective leadership has been exercised with local initiatives demonstrating some good practice e.g. tackling vehicle crime throughout the County,
- There has been effective data sharing and use of problem solving techniques e.g. police and local authority analysts working together,
- Multi-agency management and targeting of a small number of prolific offenders has been effective in reducing crime,
- A high number of Class A drug users are receiving treatment which reduces the likelihood of them committing crime.

Finally, the Safer Shropshire Partnership has prepared one plan for reducing crime in the County with a single crime reduction target for all agencies. This simplifies a potentially complicated system but still encourages a responsive local approach.

experience, people like to have visits from/see amongst them just a few people that they get to know really well and learn to trust."[12]

Many rural areas experience seasonal rises in crime and disorder associated with large increases in visitor population associated with particular events or tourism. The impact on policing and tackling disorder can at these times require approaches usually considered only in urban areas.

Crime and disorder in rural areas has received limited focus in recent years. The Countryside Agency has run a number of demonstration projects and rural crime was an IDEA beacon theme in 2002-3. The CCN task group on crime and disorder has provided a strong link into recent Home Office policy with regard to delivery of safer communities in county areas, and the examples above show that county councils are taking the lead in protecting and reassuring rural communities.

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[12] Pauline Warner, Plaistow and Ifield Parish Council. IDeA Discussion

Affordable Rural Housing

Perhaps the most crucial current issue affecting the long-term viability of rural communities is that of access to affordable housing. A lack of affordable housing means that young people are more likely to be forced into moving away if they want to live in their own homes, that growing families are less likely to be able to stay within their communities, and that key workers are harder to attract to the area to maintain services.

As the rural population increases, potentially by as much as 20% over the next two decades[13], this situation is likely to become more acute. In addition, average household size is falling due to ageing and family breakdown, so even if the population were stable demand for housing units would grow. Already in some areas house prices in the lowest quartile exceed annual incomes in the lowest quartile by a ratio of eighteen to one[14], and The number of rural households accepted as homeless and in priority has increased by almost a third since 1999/2000[15].

The inflow of low-paid workers to some rural areas following the expansion of the European Union has also created an upward pressure on housing and rental prices while exercising a downward influence on wages at the lower end of the income scale. The Commission for Rural Communities summarised the problem:

> "Pressure from better off commuters, holiday and second home owners, along with restrictive planning policies, resistance to development from some quarters, and the impact of the right to buy of council housing in rural areas, means that most village property is now well beyond the reach of people on average incomes, or even above average incomes. As a result, many people, particularly the young, childless couples, the elderly and those on low incomes, are being denied the opportunity to live in the village in which they grew up or where they work"[16].

In response to *Delivering stability: securing our future housing needs*, the report of the Barker Review of Housing Supply, the Government is committed to increasing the supply of housing, and putting in place policies that encourage planning and housing authorities to take a "whole market" approach to their strategies and programmes. A managed approach is particularly necessary because the problem of 'recent winners' means that those who have been able to purchase a home over recent years could face serious difficulties if an

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[13] *The State of the Countryside 2006*, Commission for Rural Communities
[14] *ibid.*
[15] 2006 Pre-Budget Report, Commission for Rural Communities' Policy Proposals
[16] *Evidence to the Affordable Rural Housing Commission*, 2006, Commission for Rural Communities

affordability correction happens rapidly and is price-driven rather than due to price stability and gradual wage rises.

Since 1997, the overarching objective of achieving sustainable communities has placed an emphasis on making the best use of land and resources in urban areas, and focused housebuilding on previously developed or 'brownfield' sites.

The publication of the new draft PPS3 provides a welcome recognition the need for rural housing and introduces the possibility of allocating land for affordable housing, in addition to the rural exceptions site policy that has been in place for some time.

Since they do not have powers to determine planning applications, and are not the responsible authority for public housing stock, affordable housing is sometimes seen as 'not an issue for County Councils' by people outside those organisations.

In fact affordable housing is of great importance to counties – it is regularly raised as a major factor in quality of life in surveys of the public's priorities, it determines the

> **CASE STUDY – DUNSOP BRIDGE**
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> The Duchy of Lancaster's Whitewell Estate includes much of the landscape and built environment that forms the Village of Dunsop Bridge, situated within the Trough of Bowland. This area provides some of the most accessible and frequently visited environment within the designated AONB.
>
> Rather than adopt a 'building' led appraisal process, the Duchy of Lancaster, supported and encouraged by the Lancashire Rural Delivery Pathfinder, has recognised the opportunity for an innovative approach to master planning in order to provide not just the context for redevelopment / re-use of the subject sites, but a 'road map' toward a fully 'sustainable rural community' in accordance with the vision set out in the Government's Rural White Paper 2000 and affirmed in the Rural Strategy 2004.
>
> A 'sustainable rural community' should integrate and balance social, economic and environmental issues, and provide the context for a viable, working and thriving community It should offer a diversity of housing provision, access to work and services (both public and private), and welcome visitors whilst respecting and enhancing its environmental setting.
>
> The engagement of the community and a single large landowner helped build trust in the decisions made. Appropriate consultation techniques, and the involvement of independent professionals, have been a vital part of the process.

availability of key workers to deliver the Council's other services, the sustainability of local communities, and as outlined above, the extent to which other services in small rural communities, for example primary schools, remain

viable. Counties can perform a significant role in promoting joined up working, and of course are significant owners of potential housing land in their own right.

Ongoing research commissioned by Devon County Council since 1998 to track social trends demonstrates that access to affordable housing is consistently one of the top quality of life priorities for people in the County, impacting on health, social cohesion and the economy. The issue is not therefore "owned" by any one tier of local government, or any one sector. Improving the delivery of affordable housing in rural areas is a complex process and requires actions across a range of partnerships, with an emphasis on consistency; coherence and an evidence led approach to policy. Arguably, the integration of policies and services to address the cross cutting nature of housing requires the involvement of County Councils as major service providers and strategic enablers.

A further risk is of creating unbalanced communities, where not only is housing in villages only accessible to the rich, but public services for existing residents suffer as there is no longer a critical mass, if wealthier residents are more willing to travel further afield, or opt out of public provision. However a study of rural housing provision in the West Midlands suggests that all forms of tenure have a beneficial effect on the sustainability of local communities[17].

In this context the Task Group rejects the Commission for Rural Communities' proposal that all money raised by reducing the discount given on council tax to second homes should go directly to the billing authority[18]. The County share of this income has been used across the country in imaginative and productive ways which foster integrated partnership working, and address local priorities.

In Devon, housing authorities have identified issues surrounding land, planning and funding as the major barriers to affordable housing in rural areas. Many of the issues require local solutions, but there are aspects of enabling and delivery where the activities of County Councils can add value.

Planning: The national planning policy approach aims to recycle as much previously developed land as possible, and direct most new development to sustainable, mainly urban, locations where there has been investment in infrastructure (particularly transport). The current approach views many rural locations as unsustainable on the grounds of traffic generation, countryside conservation and lack of services. The dwindling rural housing allocations set out in Regional Spatial Strategies, and in many cases the lack of clearly

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[17] *Rural Housing in the West Midlands,* Land Use Consultants and Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Renewal (2005)

[18] *Evaluation of the use of reduced council tax discount from second homes by rural authorities 2004/2005*, Commission for Rural Communities, 2006

articulated vision for rural areas means delivering rural housing through the planning system becomes increasingly difficult.

County Councils can add value by fully utilising the 4/4 role of strategic authorities set out in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 to prepare first proposals for sub regional areas, to include advice about affordable housing, rural areas and other countryside issues, and working with strategic partners to develop Rural Strategies and programmes that clearly articulate the role of housing in supporting vital and viable rural communities. Clarifying the meaning of "sustainable rural communities" and the priorities for development in rural areas.

Affordable housing as an issue will generally be seen as a significant component of the overall economic development and regeneration work of County Councils, and therefore those engaged in each aspect of this should ensure that they communicate closely, where appropriate using new mechanisms such as Local Area Agreements, including seeking freedoms and flexibilities relating to the planning system and rural housing targets.

County Councils are particularly well placed to improve delivery by coordinating the use of model planning agreements and protocols, and playing a coordinating role, research and intelligence role, in the sub regional Housing Market Assessment approach to planning for housing, to ensure rural housing issues are not overlooked and that Local Development Frameworks include appropriate thresholds and targets. This builds on monitoring work already being undertaken by County Councils as part of their planning responsibilities, and in terms of their other services.

Land: The major housing policy tool in rural areas is the "exceptions" site, but in many areas the implementation of this policy has not delivered appreciable numbers of new houses, and needs to be simplified. Housing Authorities consider the main barriers to releasing land and achieving more housing are;

- The cost of development land and the management of hope value.
- The unwillingness of landowners to release land at less than market value when the benefit passes to third parties such as Registered Social Landlords, if there is a possibility that land could be sold at commercial rates at a later date.
- The desire of some landowners to have an ongoing interest in the design and management of housing developed on their land.
- The need for tax efficiency.
- The need for financial vehicles for investment that take a longer term view of investment and offer an income stream.

- The tendency of public bodies to prioritise financial return when disposing of land.
- Lack of coordination of public assets across all parts of Government.

Many of these issues require changes to fiscal arrangements at the national level, or a response suited to very local circumstances. Some aspects of land supply can be addressed by planning policies, by ensuring policies are clear about the circumstances under which land will be released for housing.

CASE STUDY – AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN DEVON

Devon County Council has been involved in the following areas of work. Other County Councils may wish to consider whether these activities could help deliver affordable housing in their counties.

- As a member of the Rural Housing Partnership, supporting the work (both financially and in terms of advice) of the Rural Housing Enabler.
    - Advising on sustainability issues and priority settlements
    - Ensuring housing need surveys are compatible and "nest" with other information at sub regional level
    - Partnership working to draw down funding from the DEFRA Social and Community fund to support rural enabling work and to fund a second housing enabler

- Exploring innovative ways of working with communities to deliver housing as part of an integrated approach to community development; for example:
    - Supporting community capacity building through programmes such as the Market and Coastal Towns Initiative
    - Facilitating provision of advice relating to community land trusts, community banking etc.

- Use of County Council assets to progress integrated rural development: In Devon opportunities for housing in rural areas have arisen through disposal of the County Farm Estate and through rationalisation of school sites. Where this has occurred the County Council has worked with communities to bring forward a package of proposals that secures multiple objectives for them – in the case of High Bickington for example, where an integrated package of housing, employment premises, open space and new school were proposed, but turned down. The appeal was, unfortunately, dismissed, and the County Council is now working alongside the community at High Bickington to rework the proposal to address the findings of the Inspector.

Funding: Factors including local planning policies can mean there are fewer small sites available in rural areas, and in conjunction with the lack of brownfield

land this can mean that the opportunities to provide affordable housing through the planning system are more limited. Rural housing is therefore more dependent on higher levels of housing grant - currently averaging around £60,000 per unit.

Ways in which County Councils can assist include considering whether additional funding can be made available to support rural housing initiatives. Some County Councils have made money from Council Tax on 2nd homes available for housing related. In Devon, £8.85 million has been committed to fund affordable housing and supported housing since 2003, and for the next financial year £2.5 million pounds will be invested in Extracare housing (supported housing designed to facilitate independent living).

Counties have an important role working with other strategic partners, such as the Regional Development Agencies, to support innovative pilot projects to deliver affordable housing in rural areas – for example, through new financial vehicles such as asset trusts. In addition to this, they will taking a partnership approach to effective lobbying – working with regional agencies and housing authorities to promote a unified voice on housing issues. County Council research and information services can play a vital role.

Investment by the Housing Corporation is becoming aligned to sub regional housing market areas. County Councils can make their research and information services available to assist sub regional cross boundary working, and have an interest in determining the "common ground" of contextual evidence that underpins spatial strategy, housing market assessments and housing investment strategies.

Key Worker Housing: The cost of rural housing impacts on the recruitment of staff, directly affecting the ability of the public sector to deliver services in rural areas. County Councils are themselves major employers in rural areas. A particular example of the impact of a lack of affordable housing damaging service provision would be the availability of housing for retained firefighters, who must necessarily live within a certain travel time of the relevant station.

Of course County Councils are a significant employer of key workers, and therefore can gather evidence from their own organisations regarding staffing issues related to housing, and work with other major employers and public sector organisations to establish the nature and type of key worker housing required and liaise with Registered Social Landlords and funders to address the issue.

'Nimbyism': The recent Audit Commission report '*Building more affordable homes: Improving the delivery of affordable housing in areas of high demand*'[19] identified a need for local authorities to exercise a community leadership role, to make the case for more affordable housing.

In terms of combating the often negative attitudes of the public to more housing development, County Councils can use the media effectively to raise awareness of housing issues, and through their planning related activities ensure the arguments for additional housing are tested, understood and disseminated to interest groups and the public in an appropriate way. Some of these problems may be minimized if planners and designers rise to the challenge of integrating new housing into existing communities in a sympathetic way, rather than bolting on generic housing at one end of the high street. The Rural Advocate, Dr. Stuart Burgess, suggests that this was the sense he got from his meetings around the country;

> "The core message that I took away from chairing our housing inquiry around the country was a sense of genuine frustration at the apparent lack of progress in tackling this problem. People wanted to see action, not more discussion of the issues and they wanted to see it happen quickly. They recognised only too well that the housing market was altering the fabric of rural life and having significant knock-on effects, including undermining the viability of local services and leading to a lack of people to take up local jobs. Despite media stories otherwise, I was struck by the fact that very few people were against new development in their area, but they wanted to be sure it would genuinely meet local needs"[20].

A number of other aspects and issues which impact on the future of rural housing fall outside the scope of this report, but are nonetheless worth mentioning as points for discussion – the future system of land and home taxation in particular, and the wider question of land reform, the environmental sustainability of house-building and the need for more 'eco-friendly' homes, and last but not least the ongoing vexed question of whether local authorities should regain the right to invest directly in the building of social housing.

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[19] National Audit Office, December 2005

[20] Rural Advocate Report 2006, *Commission for Rural Communities*

Rural Deprivation, Exclusion and Regeneration

Levels of income poverty are rising in the countryside. 35,000 more households were income poor in 2006 than in 2004 - reaching 30% of households in the most sparsely populated areas, where average full-time weekly earnings are £130 a week lower than in the most urban areas[21].

The most significant household income gap is not between types of settlement, but depends more strongly on the sparsity of the wider area within which the settlement is located – all forms of settlement in 'less sparse' areas have household incomes about the English average, and all in 'more sparse' areas have household incomes close to this average. The largest gap is in hamlets and isolated dwellings, with an average household income of £34,000 in less sparse areas, as against £25,900 in more sparse areas[22]. In this sense it is certainly true that "There is no single rural economy, but many rural economies"[23].

One interesting point to note is that, relative to levels of income poverty, take-up of state benefits (particularly when pensions are excluded) is lower in more sparse and rural areas. This may indicate take-up problems, and in the context of lower internet use and mobility, present an argument in favour of retaining service outlets which can be used for benefit collection and banking facilities – in particular it raises a concern about whether changes to the network and services of post offices are being fully rural proofed.

The post office network draws over 60 per cent of its customer base from the traditional working class, the C2DE social categories[24] - and currently provides a local service within 1 mile for 85% of rural residents, and within 3 miles for 99%. As such the Task Group supports innovative ways to keep post office services open, for instance through co-location, and would strongly resist attempts to end the rural post office subsidy (the Social Network Payment) – one of very few rural-specific funding streams.

There are two main strands to rural poverty and deprivation – that of area based deprivation, and that of deprivation amongst individuals and families. As well as areas of great affluence, the countryside contains areas of significant deprivation, and also a great deal of hidden poverty and isolation in areas which, overall, appear affluent. In particular the dispersed nature of this need can exacerbate the deprivation itself, since it will be more expensive to provide services to a small number of geographically isolated service users, yet the apparent overall affluence of the area when using average local statistics will lead to lower central

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[21] *The State of the Countryside 2006*, Commission for Rural Communities
[22] CACI Paycheck, cited in *The State of the Countryside 2006*
[23] *Achieving Rural Revival*, 2003, Local Government Association
[24] *Counter Revolution – Modernising the post office network*, 2000, Performance and Innovation Unit

government funding for those public services. This means that ensuring maximum take-up of benefit entitlements should be a priority for rural service deliverers.

Regeneration of areas where rural poverty is widespread presents another set of challenges. While neighbourhood poverty in Britain is often perceived as an urban problem, 18 of the most deprived 100 districts in England are rural, as are 99% of wards suffering from service deprivation – a situation which could be significantly worsened if increasing competition and deregulation makes Universal Service Obligations unsustainable. In addition, focus by deprivation across a wide area risks masking 'hidden poverty' where the very poor live alongside the very wealthy, and even at the level of the Super Output Area, the statistical appearance is that of a prosperous village.

In many cases examples of widespread deprivation can be caused by the collapse of a local industry – mining or farming. While farming now accounts for only 1 job in 100 directly in the countryside, dependent services such as distribution, wholesale, and tourism are significant, and agriculture, forestry and fishing account for 17% of VAT-registered businesses in the most rural areas, and 6% in England overall[25], with agriculture providing over a quarter of total employment in some rural divisions. In this context the efficient functioning of support services to the farming industry and other land management activity is an important contributor to the health of many rural economies, and the news that the Rural Development Programme for England's 2007 programme is delayed in the European Parliament and will not start on time[26] is troubling.

Different businesses make different contributions to the local economy – and the percentage of expenditure spent locally is a factor of note when trying to build a balanced economy – ranging from only 6% for the hospitality industry to 43% for manufacturing and land-based businesses[27]. Similarly, while in-migrants are more likely to start up businesses and add to local GDP, they also tend to spend a higher proportion of their income outside the local area.

IDENTIFYING DEPRIVATION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN CORNWALL

In 1997, the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) was established with a responsibility for developing integrated and sustainable solutions to the problems faced by Britain's most deprived communities. In September 1998, as part of this strategy, the SEU recommended the introduction of a national strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal.

Drawing upon extensive research and consultation, the Government set out the main

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[25] Small Business Service, 2005, VAT Registrations and De-registrations.
[26] Written Ministerial Statement by David Miliband, 1 Nov 2006 at Hansard Column 15WS
[27] *Rural Economies – Stepping Stones to Healthier Futures*, 2003, Countryside Agency

elements of its *National Strategy Action Plan for Neighbourhood Renewal* (NSAP) in January 2001. For the 88 most deprived Local Authority districts identified by central Government, a £900 million *Neighbourhood Renewal Fund* was founded to kick-start implementation of this National Strategy. The district council areas of Penwith and Kerrier, in Cornwall, were amongst the 88 benefiting authorities, amongst a few nationally that were rural, and the only ones in the South West region. The two areas agreed, right from the start, to work together as a single Local Strategic Partnership, with the County Council as an active partner.

In Cornwall as a whole, the 2000 Index of Local Deprivation (ILD) shows that, in 80% of Cornish wards, one fifth of the population is 'multiply deprived' and, in more than one fifth of wards, over a third of the population experiences significant multiple deprivation. Within Cornwall, the *2000 ILD* reveals a further spatial concentration of deprivation primarily in the West Cornish districts of Kerrier and Penwith and especially in relation to income, employment, housing and health deprivation and child poverty. This led to the awarding of NRF "status".

The NSAP outlines the Government's strategy for achieving its overall objective that *"within 10 to 20 years no-one should be seriously disadvantaged by where they live"*. This ambitious objective is reflected in two long-term goals:

- To have lower worklessness; less crime; better health; better skills and better housing and physical environment in all the poorest neighbourhoods

- To narrow the gap on these measures between the most deprived neighbourhoods and the rest of the country

The first point to note is that the language changes from talking about "communities" to "neighbourhoods", which immediately conjures up urban rather than rural images. This may be driven from an ideological perspective, but it also reflects the availability of information at a suitably relevant level.

The awarding of NRF to the 2 districts was based on electoral ward level information providing the information that could rank them both amongst the 88 most deprived. However the partnership recognised that a more sophisticated approach to targeting was needed, and in 2001/02 it commissioned research from the University of Bristol and Cornwall College on *Poverty and Neighbourhood Renewal in West Cornwall.* The purpose of this was to identify the poorest neighbourhoods at small area - sub ward - level.

The DETR's *2000 IMD* (used to identify the 88 priority areas for NRF funding) is less appropriate in the West Cornish context since electoral wards cover relatively large spatial areas with diverse populations. Targeting NRF funding on this basis would result in significant pockets of poverty being overlooked, as well as the targeting of other areas which are not obviously 'deprived'. Similarly, the ODPM's *2004 IMD* produces results for Super Output Area (Lower Level) which have a minimum population of 1,000 and an average population of 1,500 people. They are constructed by grouping together a number of Output Areas (typically five) and thus may be too large to identify pockets

of poverty in villages in West Cornwall.

In 2000, the 1991 Census provided the only reliable data at the sub-ward level for the whole of the UK. Seven indicators derived from the 1991 Census were finally selected for analysis at the Enumeration District level (approximately 200-400 individuals). These measures approximate to the six 'domains' of deprivation (plus the supplementary child poverty index) identified by the DETR and included within the *2000 IMD*:

- Poverty rate (*Income*)
- Child poverty rate (*Supplementary)*
- Unemployment rate (*Employment*)
- Percent of people aged 18 and over with no post school qualifications (*Education*)
- Standardised Illness Ratio (*Health*)
- Percent of households with no central heating (*Housing*)
- Percent of households with no car (*Access to services*)

On the basis of these measures, it was possible to construct a scale of multiple deprivation using an approach analogous to that used in the development of the *2000 IMD*, ensuring that the final deprivation index was constructed in a similar way to that used to identify priority districts eligible for NRF funding. Enumeration Districts (EDs) were then ranked according to their score on this cumulative index. It was possible to identify the most deprived EDs for any population threshold (in this case, the 33% level, as decided by the Research Steering Group).

After extensive consultation this identified the priority areas fro NRF funding, and enabled many smaller communities throughout the more rural parts of the area to be targeted. Since then the partnership has been able to keep under review how successful its targeting has been.

The other aspect of refinement was undertaken late in 2003, when the University of Bristol was again retained to carry out some work on rural proofing. This helped the partnership to better understand the issues involved and incorporate them in its prioritisation.

The final aspect relates to further work to better identify where deprivation exists. During 2003 and 2004, the 2001 Census data became available (in addition to a number of new and updated neighbourhood statistics). These statistical data had not been available in 2001 when the original research was undertaken. This report updated the priority area analysis using the latest available data, in order to:

- Ensure that targets within Delivering Together (the West Cornwall Together Strategy) are relevant to existing need

- Ensure funding is targeted more effectively

- Undertake comparison with previously identified areas.

The more accurate and precise analyses of priority need identified smaller pockets of

deprivation in the more rural areas of West Cornwall. However, although this could have resulted in further areas becoming targeted, the partnership decided that, whilst some of the currently targeted areas were not yet fully benefiting, and with uncertainties of the future of NRF, the areas should remain the same. Nonetheless the work has provided a more sophisticated analysis that can be used in further strategy and delivery work.

Examples of outcomes are included at the end of this section.

The Countryside Agency noted[28] that while an important part of the case for public investment is to tackle disadvantage and social exclusion in deprived rural areas, it is also vital to support the contribution made to the wider national economy by businesses based in rural areas, and also to sustain 'Countryside Capital' – to reform farming subsidies in a way which militates in favour of heritage, access and biodiversity.

Arguably the split in responsibilities, where policy-making takes place at a regional level, and local areas are simply responsible for delivery, while a useful way of working in some contexts, has gone too far. Certainly there would be merits to closer communication between those drawing up policy, and those delivering it on the ground – something on which progress has been made through the Rural Pathfinder Programme. The Task Group welcomes the devolutionary trend of the 2004 Rural Strategy, and would also stress the importance of greater local flexibility on determining policy options as well as delivery mechanisms for joining up the public services to tackle rural poverty and deprivation. As noted by the IPPR;

> "Civil servants constructing policy in Whitehall often do not understand the practical difficulties involved in implementing funding programmes on the ground. As a result, the rules and regulations involved in the schemes are unnecessarily bureaucratic and complex. The increased involvement of performance systems and assessments, and greater involvement of the National Audit Office, increase paperwork and reduce risk taking."[29]

The move towards jointly agreed targets between local councils and partners, and central government, with the mediation of regional offices, through the Local Area Agreement mechanism, is a promising one for future delivery of this policy agenda. For it to be successful the recognition that the elected councils, as accountable bodies, have a 'first among equals' role in driving through local delivery, and setting local priorities.

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[28] *Rural Economies – Stepping Stones to Healthier Futures*, 2003, Countryside Agency
[29] *A New Rural Agenda,* IPPR North, 2006

Delivering Real Outcomes

As a result of the work described in the Cornwall Case Study, highlighting deprivation in the smaller rural communities of west Cornwall, many projects benefited from the funding availability.

Community facilities

Pendeen Parish Members Institute (PPMI)

Provision of a new managed new-build, multi-purpose community outreach facility to benefit the locality's economy through increased access to the job market and to improve local community activities.

The project is a new community led initiative which will introduce service providers and information and training opportunities direct to the remote local community. The project will lead to strategic co-ordination of integrated services on a local level, and improved communication between stakeholder organisations resulting in improved delivery of services to combat the problems of exclusion associated with remote rural settlements.

Pendeen Community Project - Phase II

A community wide and community capacity building project that works with the local Health Centre, District Nurses, PHA, CAB, Network Training, Credit Union and Pre-School Playgroup, Town Council and PDC to name but a few with the end result of an improved service to the community.

Mullion Youth and Community Centre

A project targeting young people socially excluded because of rural isolation and people requiring support and/or training to overcome barriers to employment.

It has refurbished an existing building to provide a one-stop-shop for rural outreach agencies for children, youth, health and employment support services on the Lizard Peninsular. Sports hall, youth cafe, counselling/meeting rooms and ICT suite are some of the facilities available - focusing on youth but available for all.

Mullion Village Wardens Phase 2

A community wide project to combat crime, the fear of crime, and anti-social behaviour through the employment of a Senior Warden and 2 part time wardens.

Wardens are working to identify areas of real need within the community through consultation, acting as a central liaison point between residents and statutory and non-statutory organisations. They deal with incidents of anti-social behaviour and other quality of life issues. Phase 2 will build upon existing relationships to provide services more strategically.

Accessibility

Youth Transport Initiative

To help young people to purchase vehicles to act as both transport services and mobile outreach for services assisting young people in West Cornwall. It is a partnership project which brings together the Cornwall Youth Service, Kerrier District Council tow work with many mainstream service providers including Penwith District Council Carn Brea Recreation Trust, Kerrier Sports Council, Kerrier Splash.

West Cornwall Community Access Vehicles Project

This is the provision of a fleet of 5 vehicles to be utilised by Victim Support Staff for the transporting of vulnerable witnesses to court and home visits.

This project will introduce and deliver mainstream services to urban and remote sectors of the community. This is applicable to all partners participating in this project. It will further strengthen the partnership collectively by joint engagement and a closer working understanding of each others roles, reducing duplication of work and thereby maximising efficiency.

Wheels to Work

The concept of the project targets the communities which inherently suffer from social exclusion by way of geographical isolation and lack of transport provision. The project will establish a shared, strategic transport resource to which clients can be referred from a number of agencies to assist with accessing employment, education and training. It will enhance mainstream services for clients without access to either private or public transport. It will also establish a moped loan scheme to provide low-cost personal transport in circumstances where existing public transport services are not viable. As well as the loan of mopeds themselves, the scheme offers the opportunity to work with credit unions to purchase the vehicles.

Links to land-based industries

<u>Healthy Boxes</u>

This has been a successful project to link the provision of quality local food with health education in West Cornwall by sourcing and distributing 'healthy boxes' containing vegetable items to groups throughout the area.

This project provides a cost effective way of distributing local produce and at the same time has the potential to improve the eating habits and dietary content of local inhabitants. The project strengthens the relationship between Penwith Healthy Living Network, Health Action Zone and Sure Starts, and is now being rolled out further in the county.

Education and Childcare in Rural Areas

Overall, educational performance is higher in rural schools, though the gap is narrower when looking at 'value added'. This should not disguise the fact that many rural areas have struggling schools, and particular challenges transporting children to and from school, with a knock-on effect in particular on staying on rates at 16[30]. The increasing cost of housing and consequent reduction in the number of families living in some rural areas risks making small schools, particularly at primary level, unviable, and smaller schools may be unable to offer the right level of specialist teaching to meets the needs of particular children.

The good news is that only 0.7% of rural primary schools closed between 2000 and 2006, compared with 2.2% of urban primary schools[31] – but this still represents a loss to a significant number of communities. The figures may not be directly comparable, as a merger of a junior and infant school, for example, or changes due to a review of education moving from three tier to two-tier in a large urban area, could give the appearance of school closures when these have not in fact taken place in the sense we would understand them.

As noted above, the closure of rural primary schools can often be linked to the lack of affordable housing – large areas of the countryside are no longer an affordable place for young families to live, so there are not enough children to make a small school viable. With the 'presumption against closure' introduced in 1998[32], the challenge of ensuring that small schools provide a good standard of education has become as important, if not more so, as the challenge of handling necessary closures in a sensitive and positive way. It is important that pressure to reduce the notional number of 'surplus places' does not mean that viable small schools come under pressure to close.

Particular problems for rural schools include fewer specialist resources, less diversity, a smaller range of subjects, more difficulty reaching critical mass for extended services, and 'stranger danger'. Lower critical mass can mean schools are less likely to be able to provide support for ethnic minority pupils – an issue which in rural areas can have wider application.

The Task Group, together with the CCN's Children and Young People Task Group has played an active part in the debate around 'rural proofing' Government proposals. In particular regarding the Education and Inspection Act – the Task Group believes there is an unresolved issue regarding how choice and diversity between schools should operate in more remote areas. The CCN believes that

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[30] *The Delivery of Education in Rural Areas*, 2003, House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee
[31] *The State of the Countryside 2006*, Commission for Rural Communities
[32] Currently at paragraph 59 of DfES *Decision Makers Guidance*

this can often best be effected in these areas by diversity within schools and a focus on the needs of individual pupils. For the same reason, the Task Group would urge a significant degree of flexibility in regulations and guidance in the implementation of measures to implement the *Youth Matters* proposals, to ensure that local government can take account of local need.

CASE STUDY – RURAL SURE START

The IDeA Beacon Scheme has recognised Shropshire County Council as a "Beacon" for empowering rural communities, thanks to the development of rural children's centres.

The key issues Shropshire faced were how to meet community needs in a rural context with a limited budget, in particular in areas with low numbers of children and limited access to public transport. This raised questions around mobile provision, and joined-up working with schools and other existing services.

An extensive audit and mapping exercise based on the number of children, deprivation data, and location of existing services and transport was undertaken, based around primary school catchment areas.

Community consultation then raised awareness and sought feedback from the public and other partners, and created mechanisms for parent involvement.

A process of rural proofing then determined how a rural children's centre would be provided in order to meet local needs most appropriately.

Shropshire cite as key learning from the process the importance of a transparent and open process, open-mindedness, and partnership working.

Young people at risk of exclusion can find it especially hard to access the support they need in rural areas. Transport is major issue for young people accessing support from agencies, especially those young people that come from disadvantaged backgrounds. In many areas Connexions does not provide rural service, but are relies on young people coming to the towns for their advice and support. Often these appointments are missed because of transport issues. Also many of these young people in the rural areas become disaffected because of not being able to access the help they need within their immediate environment.

One possible solution to this is to offer services through schools – this works well where the children being targeted attend school regularly, but can lose the distinctive value of the Connexions brand if it is simply 'another school activity'. Norfolk County Council has worked with Connexions to trial the use of Connexions advisers going out to villages in a camper van to meet young people in the area.

Often young people in rural areas in the early stages of leaving school are aware with the links with Connexions and the LSC. By the time most of these young people find out about NEETs and the specific initiatives to help them a large proportion of them are disaffected and not willing to engage.

In Teignbridge Devon Youth Service, part Devon County Council's Children and Young Peoples Directorate, are working in partnership with the voluntary youth services to work alongside these young people to gain their trust, to raise their self esteem and confidence and signpost them and assist them into taking up the opportunities to re-engage in learning and other skills. Unless the work is achieved as above these young people will not engage into Connexions, LSC and other initiatives.

CASE STUDY – PUBLIC SECTOR PROCUREMENT OF LOCAL FOOD

Task Group Members wish to see local food promoted, for the benefit of the environment, the local economy, and community awareness of these. Working with schools might be one way of delivering this, as Hampshire have discovered.

One of the key Hampshire Rural Pathfinder projects is the Public Sector Procurement of Local Food Project. This project aims to increase the number of local farmers and producers supplying the public sector. It offers farmers and growers access to a largely un-tapped market of public sector spend of food procurement worth £25 million in Hampshire and thereby encourage diversity and business growth.

This project also aims to encourage sustainable farming which will contribute to a better environment and healthier communities and will allow local farmers to benefit from the government's new policy to encourage healthier menus for school and hospital meals. Some actions so far include:

- Helping Southampton University to source local produce for a new campus restaurant
- Facilitating the use of Hampshire sweet corn in schools throughout September
- Working with St James' Hospital, Portsmouth to source local food
- Developing a new procurement website - www.localfoodsolutions.co.uk
- Investigating using Hampshire pork on primary school menus alongside existing Hampshire organic beef
- Working with South Downs College to source local food and organise student visits to producers
- Organising two more public sector food buyer farm visits

There needs to be far more recognition that this work needs to take place for these young people and also that funding streams need to be rearranged so that the Youth Service and the voluntary youth groups can carry out more of this work otherwise it would be difficult and inconsistent services, ie patchy quality services, as funding streams are becoming more complicated..

Although there are some additional difficulties with delivering this type of programme within rural areas, the main problems are common to all areas and relate to having good referral arrangements with Connexions staff on the ground and the need for an effective brokerage model with a wide range of providers who are responsive to the needs of the target group of young people.

Devon County Council runs a Pupil Referral Unit called Voyager which is the rural response PRU for pupils in years 7 to 11. It has the capacity to open up small satellite bases to work with both permanently exlcuded young people and those at risk of exclusion. Maximising the opportunities presented by working in rural areas, the PRU bases its work around outdoor pursuits, using Devon Discovery's outdoor and residential centres. In 2006 it was officially classed as good by OFSTED, who said;

> "The curriculum is good, with outstanding features. One of these is outdoor education, which is used very effectively to enhance students' personal development. Outdoor education instructors work very effectively and closely with students and offer them a wide range of activities. These include kayaking, woodland activities, where students learn to survive outside, and mountain biking and walking. Taking part in these activities provides many beneficial outcomes for students. For example, students understand that there can be real consequences of their behaviour. They know if they are engaged in a difficult climb or abseil that without following instructions carefully or using the equipment in the right way then the consequences could be very serious."

This is one example of a wider desire to make the most of a rural setting to provide relevant 'in the field' learning – one possibility is that of rural schools partnering with urban schools where this is possible to share the benefits of each.

Research by IPPR North suggests that young people who do not participate fully in the labour market in rural areas are constrained more by lack of opportunity than by lack of aspiration. They also note that traditional time-based classification of NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) may miss out an important group of young people who undertake temporary or seasonal work, with regular, but shorter, periods of inactivity[33].

Lower levels of broadband use in the most sparse areas have an impact on the extent to which transport difficulties can be resolved through e-delivery. Part of this can be explained through availability and the age profile, and it is something which the government may wish to tackle, potentially by integrating the delivery

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[33] *Should I Stay Or Should I Go: Rural Youth Transitions*, IPPR North, 2006

and education of this with the roll-out of digital television and the switchover of the signal.

The Department for Education and Skills aspires to join up local services for children and families through the creation of "one-stop shops"[34], and has made a welcome acknowledgement that local flexibility will be an important element of how to deliver these services. It is undeniable that sharing capital assets and other resources will deliver a more efficient and effective service, when done well. Flexibility must be retained, however, to ensure that rural communities do not face an 'all or nothing' choice, where they either have every service under one roof, or no provision at all. Some authorities may choose to resolve this in the case of communities slightly below whatever 'critical mass' is determined by delivering some services on a mobile basis on particular days of the week.

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[34] *Rural Services Review*, 2004, DEFRA

Delivering Health and Social Care in Rural Areas

Overall, the countryside perceived as a healthy place to live, with higher life expectancy, lower rates of infant mortality, lower levels of airborne pollution. Indeed the tradition of restorative breaks in the countryside has continued to develop, with organisations such as the CaRE network promoting rural destinations which can cater for those with particular needs[35].

Despite this, the countryside has a growing elderly population, and a significant number of residents with a limiting long-term illness – 1.6 million rural residents, and 20% of residents in sparsely populated areas[36]. There are other particular needs – for instance the suicide rate amongst young men is 50% higher in rural than urban areas.

Caring for people with lack of mobility or particular care needs due to illness or age presents particular challenges in rural areas. On the one hand, the fact of higher transport costs and geographically dispersed need mean it is even more important in rural than urban areas to promote higher levels of integrated working, and more imaginative use of capital assets. On the other hand, combined with the difficulty of transport, the migration of many younger people away from rural areas can mean that those with limited mobility face greater problems of isolation – and a loss of connection to the outside world if they have to move a significant distance to find residential accommodation.

Cumbria is home to around 488,500 people. Due to the physical geography of the county this population is very dispersed with more than 70% of settlements containing less than 200 people. The largest settlement, Carlisle, has a population of only approximately 70,000 and is one of just 20 with more than 2,500 people living there. Overall the demography of Cumbria indicates that there will be a significant increase in the number of people over 65 over the next 20 years. Cumbria County Council have worked with Age Concern to implement one possible solution to the above problem, the concept of 'host homes';

> "It can be difficult for people living in rural areas to get to day care centres. Age Concern have been working in partnership with Cumbria Social Services to get volunteers to host activities in their own homes for elderly people, Hence the name Host Homes. These activities include afternoon tea, playing games and providing a social afternoon.
>
> Volunteers invite up to four or five elderly people from the community into their home. Many of the hosts are good cooks, and the day includes a

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[35] http://www.careinthecountryside.net/
[36] ONS Census, 2001

home cooked lunch. The guests enjoy the benefits of being part of a family for the day and many valuable friendships are formed. Often it isn't just support for the day. The guests can become part of the family. If the elderly person needs to go to the doctors or hospital, their host, who may become a close friend, could be the one to go with them. Many of the home day care hosts treat their guests like another grandparent in the family.

This initiative can strengthen local communities. The friendships built up through Host Homes extend much further, providing extra support for the guests. It also means the guests build up friendships with people in their own communities, someone on their own doorstep. They don't have to travel outside their community for support. For those who are the day-to-day carers of the elderly, Host Homes provides a regular break and the peace of mind of knowing their loved one is within a safe environment and having a good time."[37]

In addition, financial pressures continue to grow for many rural, particularly rural coastal, social care authorities, as a greater number of people choose to retire there, storing up social care needs for the future. For some services, it can also be significant that the large proportion of second, or holiday, homes, means that the population fluctuates significantly over the year. A review of research suggests that rural Primary Care Trusts are more likely to be in deficit than average, and that providing out-of-hours cover where GPs have opted out of this is significantly more expensive in rural areas[38]. While the Task Group recognises the objectives driving amalgamation of hospital services in larger hospitals, it must be noted that this can disproportionately disadvantage smaller settlements, particularly where local primary care is harder to access for those people who would be better treated in this way.

16% of residents in rural areas describe it as 'difficult' to access a doctor's surgery, a figure rising to 28% of those who are income poor, and 32% of those who do not own a car. It is important to consider the effect this may have on standards of preventative care, and the consequent likelihood of more acute problems at a later stage. This highlights the fact that the NHS faces many of the same problems in this regard as social care authorities, and therefore the importance of joined-up working where appropriate cannot be overemphasised.

Emergency healthcare can also be more challenging to provide in rural areas, with the likelihood that response times will be longer, and the trend towards 'consolidation' of Accident and Emergency facilities into a smaller number of larger hospitals. Another area in which joint working has a particular importance

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[37] Age Concern, cited in *Think Rural*, Cumbria County Council, 2004
[38] *The State of the Countryside 2006*, Commission for Rural Communities

in rural areas is that of co-responding. This is most prominent in agreements with the fire service that trained firefighters will act as medical first responders if they are first on the site of an emergency. Recent legal challenges[39] by the Fire Brigades Union may have made this more complex, and it is important that a legal and contractual framework which enables co-responding to be taken up more widely is introduced.

Another approach to the problem of urgent medical care is the concept of 'Community First Responders'. For example, Staffordshire Ambulance Service, with financial support from Staffordshire County Council, are working with Parish Councils to train local volunteers as "Community First Responders" After a comprehensive training programme, CFRs attend all emergency calls in their local area, allowing treatment to begin before the ambulance crew arrives. The volunteers are equipped with an on-call vehicle, defibrillator and other essential medical equipment.

There is a risk in rural areas that younger people may be less likely to believe that they have genuinely confidential access to health care services in small communities where there is likely to be a higher coincidence between people's professional and social acquaintances.

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[39] FBU vs Lancashire and Nottinghamshire – get the proper reference

Working Locally and in Partnership

County Councils increasingly deliver services with and through partners. This may be to increase financial efficiency, whether in terms of current spending or the effective use of capital assets, to involve the community and voluntary sector, or to bring delivery to a more local level. Sometimes it may simply be because the Government has determined particular structures for delivery by which the local authority must abide.

One major question around the future of partnership working and local delivery in rural areas is the extent to which volunteers can be used to keep services going when they would otherwise not be financially viable. In particular, some have pointed to the shift towards young retirees moving to the country as a potential source of this volunteer labour. The Carnegie Commission on Rural Development believes that this is the best way forward;

> "It is our view that the sustainable development and future viability of rural Britain and Ireland should rest less upon subsidy and grant and more upon the capitalisation of rural communities, by way of wider access to and use of wealth and income-generating assets."[40]

The State of the Countryside Report suggests that levels of volunteering are not significantly higher in rural areas - 33% of rural residents state that they participate in formal volunteering once a month, compared to 26% of urban residents, with the levels for informal volunteering at 40% and 36% respectively. Nonetheless, the proportion agreeing that "People tend to help each other" is significantly higher in sparse hamlets, at 58%, than in major urban areas, at 32%[41]. This higher level of social cohesion makes rural areas particularly suitable for devolution and community-led projects.

The Task Group believes that volunteering levels may be higher in rural areas than this survey suggests, and that where they are not, they could be raised significantly by support for the infrastructure of volunteering. The challenge for authorities delivering services to rural areas is to harness this goodwill into tangible actions – it may be that the volunteering rates would be significantly higher in rural areas if the infrastructure were there to support volunteers with information about opportunities to make a difference. There is evidence that a particular aspect of this work involves recognising the distinctive nature of services provided to and by older people, who are likely to have different skills and abilities to offer[42].

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[40] *Progress Report*, 2006, Carnegie Commission for Rural Development
[41] *The State of the Countryside 2006*, Commission for Rural Communities
[42] *Rural Lifelines – Older people and Rural Social Enterprise*, 2004, Age Concern

Research undertaken for Advantage West Midlands in 2004[43] aimed to look into how the challenge of supporting voluntary activity was being addressed in an area of rural Shropshire. This found that in an area with a population of just over 10,000 people in 208 square miles, there were 340 voluntary groups operating, though only 187 had budgets in excess of £1,000 per year, and these were the ones examined in the research.

EMPOWERING SHROPSHIRE'S COMMUNITIES

Shropshire County Council achieved Beacon status for improving Rural Services: Empowering Communities in 2006. This award recognises the involvement of rural communities in developing services and work done in partnership with local people to deliver those services.

Shropshire County Council is a passionate believer in listening to the local voice and supporting local people to enable us to work together to resolve challenges appropriately, while recognising that different communities have different needs and aspirations.

The Beacon application process provided an opportunity to the work of the Shropshire Rural Pathfinder which is managed by Shropshire County Council on behalf of the Shropshire Partnership. In particular we were able to draw attention to our "parish cluster events". The purpose of these events is to build onto the back of the parish planning process where a consensus view is reached regarding local priorities and concerns and to identify what actions can be done to resolve these issues.

The Pathfinder team identifies clusters of neighbouring parishes, which have completed a parish plan, and works with them to identify four or five key priorities for action. Having selected these, residents of the parishes are invited to an evening event at a local village hall to openly discuss those issues with service providers from the County Council and other partner organisations. These events are action orientated and are facilitated. Tasks and roles are agreed during the course of the evening. These might be assigned to a service provider or a member of the community. The Rural Pathfinder team follow up these actions and communicate progress back to the parishes to ensure momentum is not lost. Approximately 16 actions per event are identified some of which involve neighbouring parishes to work together to resolve issues having realised that similar concerns cross parish boundaries.

Nearby parishes without a parish plan are also invited to attend these events. This ensures that parishes are not excluded and also gives their residents the chance to see the benefits that parish planning can bring to a community.

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[43] *Report on the Management and Governance of Resources amongst Voluntary Organisations in the Bishop's Castle and Clun Electoral Districts,* 2004, Professor Ray Pahl – copies available on request.

The total voluntary budget for the area was £6.25 million – roughly equivalent to the budget of the local district council - two-thirds of this was for educational purposes. The research supported the statistics of the State of the Countryside Report, finding that one in three adults in the area was involved in the running of a formal voluntary group. The report notes one key problem, which is lack of confidence amongst those with local knowledge in their ability to manage financial resources;

> "A serious misperception amongst active and apparently well-informed interviewees was that only a few private sector employers, three public sector employees and two other individuals were "properly qualified" to manage financial resources. Those perceived as leaders of the community clearly underestimated or did not recognise the existing managerial resources of the area..."[44]

The extent to which older people (and the younger retired) can be engaged in community activities will be a significant factor in what kind of countryside we have in the future, and a range of suggestions for doing this, and good practice examples, was included in the report "*The Hidden Store – older people's contributions to rural communities*"[45]. Some examples from Norfolk's work with developing a quality assurance scheme for day centres include:

- Prioritising verbal explanation and presentation over written information
- Recruiting from amongst service users initially and recognising that non-service-users may have different expectations (potentially being serial volunteers with for example more understanding of how committees work)
- Planning the logistics at an early stage, for example transport to meetings and events
- Not underestimating the amount of help some people are willing to provide Recognising that volunteers will stay more involved if meetings are also a social occasion for them
- Allowing volunteers 'ownership' of the process or parts of it, not treating them as token representatives
- Acknowledging and acting upon recommendations, not just having talking shops

Building community capacity in deprived rural areas is a particular challenge;

> "Rural communities face distinctive issues in engaging with partnerships. Geography can create transport and communication difficulties; low population densities lead to great demands on the people available; and

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[44] *ibid.*
[45] 2003, Age Concern

strong local community identities can inhibit the development of sustainable regeneration partnerships across wider rural areas."[46]

This links to a similar problem which was noted by 'Partners in the Countryside' when looking at how successful partnerships arise, and pointing out why existing good practice ideas may fail if there is an attempt to replicate them 'by committee' in a different set of circumstances;

"many such partnerships are dominated by individuals and small teams with the vision and determination to "do something" about the problems they see facing their community. Our experience of rural partnership is that its existence, let alone its success, is often dependent upon such 'Community Entrepreneurs'.

The key role of such individuals and small teams can easily be lost in traditional case studies, which focus on the conclusion of a project, not its creation."[47]

This strategic but local agenda is one role for parish councils, with whom counties have made valuable links, as in many areas they are a good way to involve people who have significant expertise, and are interested in issues we might call 'politics', but significantly less interested in the process we might call 'Politics'. In June 2007 the Dorset Strategic Partnership, led by the County Council, will be launching a Parish Planning Toolkit. This will consist of information sheets on particular issues ranging from healthy living to climate change, designed to develop greater understanding by the community of what they can expect from statutory bodies and other partner organisations and how they can get it, and by partner organisations of how they can directly support community action.

The Commission for Rural Communities has highlighted the view that there is a disconnection in this regard – a lack of trust amongst rural people that policy makers and officials understand the practical circumstances in which their decisions are given effect. More local and community working is one way of addressing this;

"One major message to emerge from the report is the apparent lack of faith people in rural communities have in decision makers' understanding of local needs and circumstances, nationally and regionally - a perception held most strongly by those in the smallest rural settlements and in the sparsely populated areas. There is a general concern about the wider disconnection of the public, rural and urban, from government at various

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[46] *Community involvement in rural regeneration partnerships*, 2002, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
[47] *Working with Rural Communities – A Guide to Rural Partnership*, 1998, Partners in the Countryside

levels. It is, I believe, one of the drivers of the current active policy debates on governance. As a result, there is an emerging policy agenda to find ways of increasing devolution of decision-making to more local, neighbourhood levels and for increasing the extent to which communities are consulted in key decisions which affect their lives and their local environment"[48].

The Government foresees town and parish councils playing an important role in the ten-year vision for local government being proposed by DCLG and in the proposals for modernised rural service delivery being developed by Defra. Town and parish councils also feature significantly in the issues that are currently at the top of principal authorities' agendas, including Local Area Agreements, Local Public Service Agreements, Comprehensive Performance Assessments, etc.

At the same time, local councils themselves also have a growing work programme, to which principal authorities (particularly County Councils) can contribute. First, the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme calls for the involvement of principal authorities, both in the accreditation process and in the subsequent development of the activities with Quality Councils.

Secondly, the importance of developing the capacity of town and parish councils has been recognised by the establishment of County Training Partnerships, led by County Association of Local Councils. These Partnerships organise structured programmes of events to meet locally defined training needs. Again, County Councils should be active members of these Partnerships.

Thirdly, there has been an added impetus to the formulation of Charters between local councils and principal authorities. Research on Charter formation undertaken on behalf of the Commission for Rural Communities resulted in the production of a "Charter Checklist". This, while acknowledging that Charters need to reflect particular circumstances, concluded that meaningful Charters should articulate a clear commitment by principal authorities to engage in key local issues.

The trend towards increased neighbourhood and community governance is one which the Rural Issues Task Group supports. This does not mean, however, that all those who wish to be involved in planning the future of a local area and helping to deliver improvements should be required to seek a formal mandate. This could risk excluding precisely those valued 'community entrepreneurs' who wish to be involved in one particular project.

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[48] Rural Insights – Assessing the views, concerns and priorities of rural England, 2006, *Commission for Rural Communities/ Ipsos MORI*

Too much formality could in particular inhibit the ability to make a quick start on short-term projects, and the Task Group recognises that effective community involvement can take many different forms which will differ according to local circumstances. County Councils can be valuable partners for first tier councils and community organisations, providing logistical and infrastructure support – for example reducing the costs of insurance for community transport through bulk purchasing where appropriate.

CASE STUDY – WORKING WITH PARISHES IN CHESHIRE

"Local Governance in Cheshire for the 21st Century", Cheshire's response to the Boundary Committee's draft recommendations for unitary local government in Cheshire, spelt out very clearly the importance they place on town and parish councils as the building blocks of local communities and their role in local governance through devolution arrangements. Cheshire County Council actively supports the parishing of unparished areas and are encouraging Local Councils to work towards Quality Council status.

At a very practical level, these two areas of work are being driven forward by a CCC funded Regional Development Officer working through the Cheshire Association of Local Councils. Whilst progress is understandably slow in the parishing of un-parished areas, Cheshire now has 14 Quality Councils with more working towards this goal. A new Cheshire Quality Councils Forum has been established and they are hoping to pursue the devolution debate through this route in the near future.

CCC has a long history of collaborative working with Local Councils and a strong commitment to improving their relationship with them. This began in 1993 with a "Statement of Intent" and was further developed in 1999 with a Local Charter, agreed jointly with the Cheshire Association of Town and Parish Councils (CATPC), which set out a series of principles the two organisations believed should characterise effective working relationships between the County Council and all town and parish councils in Cheshire. More recently, this Charter has been updated as the "Cheshire Charter for Local Councils – A New Way of Working" and reflects their continuing commitment towards closer working and an 'enhanced' relationship with our Quality Councils. Since 1999, the Charter has also included a protocol for involving Local Councils in their decision-making Highways & Transportation Local Joint Committees.

As part of a package of proposals to further develop their local working arrangements, CCC are also exploring opportunities for devolving funding directly to Local Councils to support local initiatives or projects. In the interim, they are also identifying ways in which Local Councils can influence local spending and have some good examples of where this has happened successfully, particularly in relation to the delivery of the Local Transport Plan area programmes.

A council-wide protocol for engaging with parish planning and responding to Parish Plans has also now been adopted. Again, this seeks to support the role of the Local Council in the locality planning process. As the most local community based plan that

sets the vision of how that community wants to develop, Cheshire County Council has recognised the importance that Parish Plans play in identifying local needs.

Cheshire County Council succeeded in meeting one its first generation Local Public Service Agreement targets, to "Increase Social Cohesion and strengthen Social Capital in Rural Communities". The target was based on the development of Parish Plans.

Now that the LPSA target has been achieved, additional funding has been made available to assist Parishes to undertake and implement Parish Plans. Cheshire County Council is also funding a full time Parish Plans officer post based within the Rural Community Council. A parish plan partnership group has been pulled together to lead on Parish Plan activity and development. It also will take responsibility for delivering Defra's Social and Community Programme.

Cheshire County Council has earmarked funding to help Parishes undertake delivery of some services that meet specific local need. For example local transport needs have been supported via a Taxi Voucher scheme, and a post has been part funded to assist a Town Council bring redundant buildings back into community use.

The Labour Group of Rural MPs concluded that many of the problems were the same, but that tailored solutions would be required[49]. Since then, the regional agenda has attempted to bring delivery more closely to the local area. While Regional Offices and Development Agencies often do useful work, this change does not in fact feel like devolution. The reaction to the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak in 2001 was a case study in the failings of centralism, and the outcome of the Haskins review was an organisationally sound system, but one which risked significantly reducing the public realm, and the opportunities for informal participation.

In the consultation paper; *Citizen Engagement and Public Services: why Neighbourhoods Matter*[50] the then ODPM set out it's ideas for securing sustainable improvements in public services and re-engaging citizens with the institutions of government. The cornerstone of this approach was a series of proposals for empowering neighbourhoods.

County Councils may have difficulties in identifying their particular contribution to this agenda. Moreover, it may be seen as an exclusively urban, rather than rural issue. However, County Councils are increasingly being required to demonstrate their ability to "think strategically and act locally".

In rural areas this can find expression by partnership working in a number of dimensions, including with town and parish councils (see above) and the

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[49] *Rural audit: a health check on rural Britain*, 1999, Labour Group of Rural MPs
[50] ODPM, 2005

voluntary and community sector. To develop these links County Councils could consider:

- Identifying parish liaison officers
- Nominating lead elected members with responsibility for ensuring good working relationships with local councils
- Supporting (further) the work of Rural Community Councils and those capacity building initiatives in rural areas being implemented through the ChangeUp programme
- Ensuring that Compacts with the community and voluntary sector and the respective Codes of Practice are "rural proofed".

County Councils are well placed to act as community leaders and to shape a local area – the support for this role in a rural context particularly finds expression in times of structural turbulence, when people are uncertain who will be making future decisions about their services.

"Proposals to introduce elected regional assemblies further reinforced fears about the marginalisation of rural interests within regional governance, not least because the proposals involved the abolition of county councils, which are widely perceived as an institution for rural self-governance and an expression of a territorial rural identity"[51]

Partnership working in rural areas will require County Councils to work more closely with town and parish councils, to participate in the development of the

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CASE STUDY – MOBILE OFFICE

In July 2006 East Sussex County Council launched a pilot Mobile Office programme. This is a new outreach service using satellite technology to bring services to local communities.

There are 6 laptops providing free internet access, access to the library catalogue and access to council services. Tutors are on board to provide ICT tuition and help.

Early signs are that it is proving a real asset to the council and its communities. Usage will be monitored to ensure this pilot can be developed to reach other communities across the county.

Government's neighbourhood agenda, to respond to the future role envisaged for Local Strategic Partnerships and to expand their contribution to a range of other locality-based initiatives (including the Rural Pathfinders, the Market Towns Initiative, Rural Sure Starts, etc).

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[51] *A New Rural Agenda,* IPPR North, 2006

Researchers at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation identified six components of good practice: *getting the right individual in the right project; using different organisations and structures to develop community involvement at different levels; clarifying the nature of community involvement sought; ensuring that appropriate funding is available; ensuring that strong local voluntary and community infrastructure are essential to promote and support community involvement; and building in proper evaluation so as to enhance future practice.* This last was the area of greatest weakness[52].

At the present time the development of effective partnership working needs to be seen at the moment in the context of the threats and opportunities presented by possible reorganization bids following the publication of the *Strong and Prosperous Communities* White Paper, and indeed in the context of difficult situations left by the legacy of past reorganisations, actual or abandoned, and the developing city region agenda.

The importance of building on the work of member authorities who were Rural Pathfinders was emphasised. In addition, there is a different value to LSPs at District and County level, and a value in ensuring that County Councils are represented on the District LSP. It is important that these structures see one another as partners rather than rivals.

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[52] *Community involvement in rural regeneration partnerships*, 2002, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Recommendations

The Task Group believes that;

- While rural Proofing has been in operation since 2000, the benefit of this needs to be spread so that mainstream government initiatives are considered in the context of delivery in the countryside and two-tier authorities before implementation, rather than either as a later add-on, or not at all.

- Increasing e-delivery of services will be beneficial to many in rural areas, but care must be taken to ensure that this does not lead to a worsening spiral of exclusion for those left behind by these technologies.

- Councils should be able to compete on a level playing field as direct providers of affordable housing where there is demonstrable unmet need, and in the case of private housing the target percentage of 'affordable' homes should be increased when possible, with a mix of homes for sale and for rent.

- The existence of 'rural champions' and the use of focused 'rural reviews' within an authority has often been productive, and the Task Group would urge authorities to consider whether these can be used as a way of improving the evidence and policy base for service delivery, and sharing good practice.

- With limited funding to deliver rural services difficult choices will have to be made between working via a 'hierarchy of settlements', spending more to maintain more service centres, funding for more transport to and from a smaller number of service points, or more house-building to increase the sustainability of services in smaller settlements. A wider view should be taken of "costs" when undertaking this analysis, for instance to include the environmental and transfer costs of a greater number of people using private transport if local facilities are closed without better public transport.

- Opportunities to share learning from rural projects should be used as widely as possible, with a strong profile given to the outcomes of the Rural Pathfinders as they reach their conclusions, and themes for the Beacon Scheme set out in a way which maximises the opportunity to learn from both urban and rural projects.

- More flexibility should exist in the use of long term funding rather than funding for initiatives which then have to be mainstreamed – the function of deciding what will be piloted or pump-primed and what will be funded on an ongoing basis should lie with councils and communities.

- An analysis should be undertaken, ideally by the Commission for Rural Communities, of former rural-specific funding streams which have been rolled into wider 'pots', to address the perception that rural areas have lost out in this process.

- Following the publication of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill, the legal framework for partnership working needs to be made more robust, with local government acting as first among equals in partnership arrangements, and all relevant agencies placed under a duty to co-operate.

Conclusion

This report has looked at a range of issues and challenges facing rural areas. It has shown some of the ways in which local government, in partnership with other organisations and local communities themselves, has attempted to meet those challenges, and where we feel Counties are best placed to deliver, and what help they need from partners. The key partners will always be the public however – the words of thirty years ago remain true today

> "No amount of government help or local initiatives will save rural services unless they are wanted and used by local people."[53]

It is for this reason that provision must remain flexible, evidence-based, and rooted in local communities, and work with the grain of what local people want and need, rather than working to models designed by remote urban professionals. At the same time, it is for this reason that the future of services in rural areas, as much as urban ones, if not more so, requires politicians, local and national, who are prepared to value the existence of shared civic space, and advocate for the existence of a distinct public realm.

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[53] Standing Conference of Rural Community Councils, 1978