Rural proofing & Rural impact assessments – "Thinking Rural"

Summary of guidance published by the Commission for Rural Communities (April 2009)

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What is rural proofing?

Rural proofing is shorthand for a process that involves assessing how policies will work for rural people and places and, so, ensure that the policies are implemented fairly and effectively. As policies are developed, policy-makers need to ask:

- Is the policy likely to have a different impact on different areas/ communities?
- Will the impacts be significant in rural areas?
- How can a policy be adjusted to ensure that the needs of rural communities are taken into account?
- Rural proofing applies to all policies, programmes and initiatives
- national, regional and local - and at both the policy design and delivery stages.

Such approaches have been developed in a number of other countries across the world and for various other proofing or equity issues within England. The English rural proofing approach has been one of the more successful systems developed and tested.

The questions below will help you to work out if your initiative is likely to encounter the challenges posed by rural circumstances. Some potential solutions are also indicated, to help you consider helpful adjustments.

The questions have been designed to apply to general policy making processes and are not specifically tailored to financial inclusion initiatives.

Step one: The policy development process

Most departments have tailored guidance covering how policy should be developed. What follows is a recap of the general stages, highlighting where **'thinking rural'** will be most useful.
- What are the **objectives** of the proposed policy?
- What are its **intended impacts or outcomes?**
- Which **areas, groups or organisations** are supposed to benefit?
- What is the **current situation** and why is it not delivering the outcomes required?
- How will you **move** from the current situation to where you want to be? What's the **rationale** for intervention? How will you deliver what is needed? Are all realistic **options** being appraised?
- Where answers reveal a **potentially different impact** for rural areas/people; or uncertainty, investigate further. Evidence based decisions are key to good policy-making. Use Step Two (below) to help to rural proof your policy and consider what evidence you may need.

- Where the impact in rural areas will be significantly different, explore how to **adjust policy options** to produce the desired outcomes in rural areas or avoid/mitigate any undesirable impacts. This exercise may also highlight opportunities to maximise positive impacts in rural areas.
- **Seek advice**, as necessary, including from the Commission for Rural Communities and other rural stakeholders and experts.

- On implementation, monitor change - evaluate the impact the policy is having, using appropriate data collection, and assess what is, or isn't being achieved.

Step two: Rural proofing policy development

In order to consider the themes, questions and prompts below, the availability of a strong and credible evidence base is essential. Such evidence could include:

- Existing research, surveys or analysis that includes a rural dimension
- Specially commissioned data and research
- Use of the ONS Rural and Urban Areas definition to interpret data sets.

1. Service provision and availability

The current recession is likely to affect many programme budgets. When you are considering methods of reducing budget spend, services delivered to rural communities should not to be perceived as a source of 'quick-fix' budget savings.

Rural communities are particularly vulnerable to service cuts as they are already reliant on a limited number and have reduced access to alternatives. Therefore, the CRC urges careful consideration of rural circumstances, and the options listed below, prior to any budget cuts being made.

Will the policy affect the availability of public and private services? Will it result in closures or centralisation? Will this have a disproportionate effect in rural areas where services are already more limited?

For nearly all service types, availability has fallen in rural areas since 2000, with NHS dentists, Post Offices and Job Centres affected.

Some Rural Solutions:

- Share premises or staff with other service providers to maintain or create a rural outlet ('joint provision').
- Provide additional funding to rural outlets to maintain service standards.
- Improve transport/accessibility to compensate for the centralisation of services.
- Encourage alternative funding streams for threatened rural services.

Will the policy rely on existing service outlets, such as schools, libraries and GP surgeries? How will you ensure rural residents can access services in areas where such outlets are few and far between?

The number of service outlets is declining in urban and rural areas. Such reductions tend to be felt more keenly in rural areas. Generally, rural people already have to

travel further to access key services than their urban counterparts, and are losing services more quickly than elsewhere.

Some Rural Solutions:

- Use mobile and outreach services.
- Use ICT to avoid the need to visit outlets.
- Deliver effective public and community transport solutions.
- Share premises or staff with other service providers to maintain or create a rural outlet ('joint provision').

Will the policy rely on the private sector or a public-private partnership? Will the smaller and scattered nature of rural populations provide a sufficient market to attract the private sector? Will there be similar opportunities for choice and competition? Does the private sector in rural areas have a capacity to deliver?

The 2007 Index of Multiple Deprivation shows rural areas have, on average, lower concentrations of deprivation than urban areas.

Some Rural Solutions:

- Consider the use of regulation, including universal service obligations.
- Set rural delivery targets.
- Draw up contracts which prevent cherry picking of the most profitable (urban) markets.
- Encourage commercial providers with incentives.
- Offset higher rural costs, for example through rate relief.

2. Delivery costs

Will the cost of delivery be higher in rural areas where clients are more widely dispersed and economies of scale can be harder to achieve? Will longer travel times or distances add to the cost of service provision? Will services need to operate out of smaller outlets, so losing economies of scale?

[Rurality] leads to increased travel by both service providers and service users. Debt advisers have reported that they see a lower number of clients in a day than their urban counterparts because of the travel distances involved. GPs found that they did more home visits in rural areas because they knew that many of their patients had no transport and could not travel to the surgery.

Some Rural solutions:

- "Despite significant investment by national and local government to promote financial inclusion, the infrastructure required is weak"
- Allow for higher unit delivery costs in funding formulae, for example a sparsity factor, or when specifying cost-efficiency criteria.
- Encourage joint provision to reduce costs.

Will the policy rely on local institutions for delivery? Will the policy be as effective in rural areas, where private, public and voluntary sector organisations tend to be smaller and may have less capacity to build partnerships? If funds or services

are to be allocated via a bidding process, will small organisations be able to compete fairly?

Some Rural Solutions:

- Provide specific support for capacity building.
- Allow longer timescales for bidding.
- Simplify the bidding process.
- Allow for an increased level of public or voluntary sector input to compensate for the possibility of limited private sector input.

3. Accessibility and infrastructure

Will the policy affect travel needs or the ease/cost of travel? Will the impact be different in sparsely populated or remote rural areas where, typically, journey times are longer, public transport is poor, and alternative travel options are limited or expensive, especially for low income groups?

Rural residents travel greater distances in their daily lives than urban people, and more of their travel is by car.

Some Rural Solutions:
- Reduce the need to travel by using mobile services or local delivery or telephone/internet.
- Address travel difficulties by co-ordinating and improving transport links, for example additional services, demand-responsive transport or community transport schemes.
- Alleviate the costs of travel either by subsidising services or individuals (remembering that there may be no public transport service between many rural locations).
- Consider operating times – late night or weekend hours may be more useful to one-vehicle rural households where the main breadwinner needs private transport for work.

Does the policy rely on infrastructure (e.g. broadband ICT, main roads, utilities) for delivery? How will the policy work in rural areas, where the existing infrastructure is typically weaker (e.g. roads, broadband quality), some infrastructures don't exist (cable TV, mains gas supply) and the upgrading of infrastructure may be difficult or expensive?

Initiatives started in 1998 mean that the percentage of people living within 10 minutes of an hourly or better bus service has risen. However, rural transport provision is still a major concern and many rural areas remain poorly served by public transport.

Some Rural solutions:
- Consider using regulation or licences to encourage the development of improved infrastructure.
- Encourage or co-ordinate demand to make supply viable.
- Use the public sector's collective demand to stimulate supply.
- Provide alternative means of accessing the service.

Will delivery of the policy be challenging at the 'edges' of administrative areas? Many rural people live in the borderlands of regions/local authorities and sometimes

find it easier to cross an administrative boundary to access services. Particular effort may be needed to make sure that a policy does not disadvantage border communities.

Some Rural solutions:
- Encourage 'postcode blindness' and the reciprocal sharing of service provision across administrative borders where this makes sense (as is already the case with some emergency services).

Is the policy dependant on new buildings or development sites? Where will these go in rural areas, given that there are fewer brownfield sites, more planning restrictions, and certain locations where development may be unacceptable?

Some Rural Solutions:
- Create flexibility for development to be located where it is most appropriate and needed, for example in market towns or villages.
- Opt for high quality development that will contribute to local character and distinctiveness.

4. Communications

Does the policy rely on communicating information to clients? How will clients access information in rural areas, where there are fewer (formal) places to obtain advice and information?

Most rural communities benefit from a long established form of statutory and elevated neighbourhood council - the Parish or Town Council. England has over 10,000 Town or Parish Councils (2004 figure) of which about 9,000 were in rural areas.

Some Rural solutions:
- Be flexible about using the rural networks and meeting
- points that do exist e.g. post offices, village halls,
- Link up with other information providers, including parish and town councils.
- Use local radio, newspapers and websites.
- Provide mobile advisors.
- Use the internet and information technology.

5. Economies

Will the policy impact on rural businesses, including the self employed? Will it have a different effect on smaller businesses (which employ a greater proportion of the workforce in rural areas) or those sectors which are typically more significant in rural areas? Will the higher proportion of self-employed people in rural areas be affected by the policy (including women running part time businesses)?

In 2006, more than 1 in 4 (26.8%) of employees worked in small firms (employing less than 10 people) in less sparse villages, compared with only 11% of employed people in urban areas.10

Some Rural Solutions:
- Ensure the needs of smaller businesses are specifically addressed.
- Take support, advice and training out to businesses.

- Where possible avoid regulatory or other burdens that will disproportionately affect small firms.

Will the policy affect land-based industries and, perhaps, rural economies and environments? How will the policy affect agriculture and/or local mining, extraction and water industries (which have a particular importance in many rural areas)? Will there be a knock-on effect on the environment? What might the impacts be for businesses which rely on a high-quality environment – such as farming, tourism, leisure, renewable energy and food production?

Employment in agriculture has fallen by about 7% since 1999, and by 39% for full-time farm workers.

Some Rural Solutions:
- Identify 'win – win' solutions which will deliver economic and environmental benefits, for example by promoting local supply chains, especially between food producers and consumers.
- Consider incentives for environmentally-friendly practices.
- Allow for, and encourage, a diverse range of rural enterprises.

Will the policy affect people on low wages or in part-time or seasonal employment? Wages tend to be lower on average in rural areas and a higher proportion of the workforce relies on part-time or seasonal employment. Will the proposal affect wage levels or access to quality employment? Will it affect the type of businesses that tend to pay low wages or offer seasonal/part time work, for example agriculture or tourism?

The Annual Small Business Survey conducted for the Small Business Service showed that business in rural areas are more likely to employ some staff on the minimum wage than non rural.

Some Rural solutions:
- Check the effects of your proposal against other (especially welfare) policies to ensure that the transition between wages/ benefits and employment/unemployment is sufficiently flexible and supportive.
- Consider measures to improve the choice of work, for example by increasing skills, improving local childcare or improving transport to work.

6. Disadvantage

Will the policy target disadvantaged people or places? How will this work in rural areas where disadvantage is rarely concentrated? Do the indicators being used to identify deprivation take account of uniquely rural challenges, such as access to services, job opportunities, low earnings, transport and the affordability of housing?

Only 2.4% of the small-areas in the bottom fifth of England's index of worst deprived places are rural. But other indicators, based on statistics about individuals, show that 15% of the country's most deprived people are rural residents.

Some Rural Solutions:
- Target population groups rather than deprived areas.
- Use small-area statistics to identify the smallest pockets of deprivation.

- Adjust the indicators, or their weighting, to accommodate both urban and rural aspects of deprivation.
- Designate larger areas for targeting, to pick up scattered disadvantage.

Step three: Policy implementation and evaluation

Like many aspects of good policy development, rural proofing is an ongoing process. Once a policy initiative has been implemented, it is important that any evaluation mechanism includes the rural perspective.

Implementation

Implementation is a key part of any policy process. Unless properly implemented, a policy is unlikely to achieve the outcomes intended. It is at implementation that the decisions made during the policy design and delivery stages make their impact felt. This is also when issues that are particular to rural areas can arise. Traditionally, the implementation phase is when tweaks are made to accommodate rural needs and challenges. But good, and early, rural proofing should result in fewer flaws surfacing at this point - because the needs of rural locations and communities have been taken into account already.

Evaluation

Evaluation has become a key part of contemporary policy making. Once a policy or programme is in place, it is important to provide evidence of its effectiveness and it is equally important to make rural communities part of the evaluation process. An evaluation which ignores the effects of a policy on people in rural areas will fail to show if a mainstream policy is truly effective.