

Policy Position Statement

Rural Proofing

Ensuring that the needs of rural areas and rural people are fully considered and responded to when developing policies or strategies is something that should be integral in all public-sector and statutory decision-making.

Introduction

The Government's view that all policies should take account of the needs of rural areas and rural people is laudable. Given that there are very few specific rural policies related to communities and businesses, it is essential that public policy on mainstream themes (e.g. health, education, housing etc.) considers rural. The process of rural proofing should ensure that rural dwellers are not unfairly disadvantaged by any policy decisions and that the needs of rural communities are adequately considered and responded to.

In order for the concept of rural proofing to be effective it needs to have clear aims, a rigorous systematic approach and deliver appropriate responses for rural areas. However, a very limited number of examples that incorporate all of these elements are readily identifiable. It is interesting that the most effective rural proofing appears to occur at the regional and local level rather than within central government.

In part, this failure to fully integrate rural proofing across central government policy has had a widespread impact on how rural dwellers are affected by policy decisions. Existing methods of carrying out rural proofing tend to be developed on an ad-hoc basis by a wide range of different bodies. To some extent this reflects the varying level of priority ascribed to rural proofing. Such a scenario has more wide-ranging implications. For example, there is the problem of integrating policies or mechanisms developed by various bodies, each of which has undergone different levels or types of rural proofing.

The current barriers to effective rural proofing stem from a variety of different factors. Many policy makers are still unclear as to what the concept of rural proofing actually involves, particularly how and when to undertake it. This often leads to retrospective rural proofing which in reality simply renders it to the level of a

tick box exercise. Other problems include the inability of policy-makers to acknowledge that rural needs may differ or that there is a need to develop alternative and potentially more costly service delivery. There are also practical barriers such as how to go about measuring and comparing rural and urban need, or developing more equitable delivery approaches.

There are examples of effective rural proofing and lessons can be learned from these. Key to this is ensuring that policy-makers are made aware that rural areas and people may have differing needs to those in urban locations. Once this has been established, it is then important to assist them in determining what the differences between rural and urban communities are and how policy should account for these.

What is rural proofing?

The concept of rural proofing was introduced in 2000 following the publication of the Government's White Paper entitled '*Our countryside, the future – A fair deal for rural England.*'¹

Within this document a chapter entitled 'Thinking Rural' concluded that the impact of government policies on rural people, businesses and the countryside had not always been properly considered. The concept of rural proofing was developed in order to adjust this so that rural concerns were objectively considered in government policy.

The Rural White Paper outlined a view of rural proofing as a means of ensuring that policy is developed and implemented by government and other statutory bodies in a systematic manner. This focused on three main elements.

¹ MAFF & DETR. (2000). *Our countryside: the future – A fair deal for rural England.*

1. Firstly, to determine whether a policy would have any significant detrimental impact in rural areas.
2. If any impacts on rural areas can be identified, to assess what these are and how significant they might be.
3. To consider whether policy changes are required or whether mitigation for rural areas can be developed.

Over time the concept of rural proofing has been refined. In its 2007 annual monitoring report into rural proofing², the Commission for Rural Communities described it as:

“the mechanism used by government, at national and regional levels, to ensure that rural needs and circumstances are taken into account in policy development and delivery.”

Guidance on rural proofing provided by Defra and the Commission for Rural Communities has so far been relatively limited. It has largely comprised of explanations, checklists and case-studies. This has arisen due to the need to create materials that are suitable for a wide range of audiences. However, one of the major barriers associated with implementing rural proofing is determining how it can be integrated into existing mechanisms. Therefore, once an acknowledgement of the need to undertake rural proofing has been established, the guidance needs to reflect the practical tasks involved in determining the rural need and incorporating this into policy and delivery systems. It is undertaking these practical tasks that many bodies have particular problems with and require clear tailored assistance.

The current status of rural proofing

In what is fast approaching a decade since rural proofing was introduced, how successful has the concept been in ensuring that public policy responds adequately to rural needs?

It would seem reasonable to expect that by now rural proofing would have been successfully integrated into the policy development process across all tiers of government and in statutory bodies. However, the reality is significantly different and rural areas are still facing barriers in securing an equitable relationship with urban areas in the eyes of public policy makers.

What are the barriers to rural proofing?

A wide array of factors have restricted the progress in implementing a comprehensive system of rural proofing, not least the failure of

central government to get its own house in order. By not setting an example, central government has not only failed to show that rural proofing is important and achievable, it has also allowed barriers that prevent other agencies from successfully incorporating rural proofing into their processes to be maintained.

Process rather than outcome

Perhaps the greatest single limitation in the effectiveness of rural proofing to deliver successful outcomes has been the manner of its implementation. Rather than rural proofing being developed as a compulsory means of delivering tangible outcomes on behalf of rural areas, it is instead a process included to assess whether rural is considered during policy development or implementation.

As a result, the current reality is that there is no requirement on any policy maker to develop their policy in a way which actually has a tangible change that responds to the needs of rural areas. Instead, all they must do is show that they have considered ‘rural’ throughout the process of developing the policy. Such a position undermines the importance of rural proofing and tends to relegate the process to little more than a tick-box exercise in the eyes of some policy makers.

Of the 30 Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets introduced in the 2007 comprehensive spending review, not one included a specific rural component. This means that no government department possesses a target to deliver to rural areas, not even Defra. This position arose as a result of the argument being made by government departments that issues facing rural people and places are in common with those occurring in urban areas. Therefore, if the policies produced by these departments were effectively ‘rural proofed’ then delivery to rural areas would automatically occur. However, even where rural needs are acknowledged as being significant or different from urban needs, there is no guarantee that changes to policy will be developed or implemented.

Centralised Targets

Whilst county and district authorities have been particularly effective at integrating rural proofing into policies, both they and other statutory bodies are subject to limitations beyond their control which restrict their ability to consider or respond to the needs of rural areas.

Perhaps the single most significant restriction is the requirement to respond to or be measured by central government targets. This means that whilst at the local level an organisation may be fully aware of the need to develop equitable services, it may be prevented from doing so because it has to respond to centralised targets.

² Commission for Rural Communities. (2007). *Monitoring Rural Proofing 2007*. Commission for Rural Communities: Cheltenham.

Central targets are often set with little consideration or knowledge of how they may affect delivery at the local level. Certain targets can only be met through the use of statistics or datasets that have the potential to be used in ways that disadvantage rural areas. Alternatively there are those within which is very little scope to determine delivery methods or locations and any urban bias in these policies is then translated into the delivery phase.

Focus on areas not people

Central government targets often possess an emphasis on areas in need and not on people, or they relate to a baseline measure against which progress can be assessed.

In the case of the former, this tends to lead to an emphasis on urban areas where the concentration of need may be higher, even if there is greater overall need distributed across rural areas. An example of this is a focus on the 20% most 'deprived' wards, rather than on the 20% most 'deprived' people. Such approaches lead to a focus on urban areas where there is a tendency for concentrations of deprivation to be located, however, this disadvantages the deprived people living in rural locations.

Other issues arise regarding how need or delivery is measured across a geographical area and whether it incorporates an approach that can determine where progress is being achieved and where it is not. For example, measuring progress against a percentage or numerical target across an entire local authority or county area has the potential to be particularly detrimental for rural areas if no account is made of where the need is located and how progress is distributed.

Problems occur as the emphasis is placed on the target itself, rather than on how it is achieved. Consequently, overall progress rather than equity of delivery tends to become the priority, and an emphasis tends to be placed on meeting goals as quickly and cheaply rather than equitably. This commonly results in a focus on urban areas where delivery is usually cheaper and simpler to implement due to economies of scale and the proximity of those in need. As such, targets can often be met by only delivering services to a proportion of the population in need.

Measures used to assess need

The data currently used to identify and assess need commonly possesses characteristics that serve to disadvantage rural areas. This represents a significant problem, as in many cases the targets are set on the basis of the datasets or information available. Consequently, the problems included in these datasets become engrained as the only (or

simplest) way to respond to a target set by them is to utilise the same flawed dataset/measure to assess progress.

All statistics possess limitations, however, some have particular characteristics that may influence how the needs of rural communities are presented. Commonly used datasets such as the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) are relative rather than absolute measures of need. This means that they compare the attributes of different areas rather than the numbers of people affected. Datasets such as the IMD also possess limited value on how to develop a response to the need as they do not provide much detail regarding how and why an issue arises, what characteristics it possesses and how it may be responded to.

There are certain features related to datasets which are commonly overlooked by many analysts and policymakers when determining strategies and delivery mechanisms. For example, it is important to acknowledge that not all deprived people live in deprived areas and that deprived areas do not only contain deprived people. This is an important factor to acknowledge and be aware of when attempting to determine and respond to need, particularly given the focus on area-based need which currently dominates within public sector policy development.

Other problems can occur as a result of how the information is interpreted. Very rarely is data broken down into rural components and urban components, it is therefore relatively easy to fall into the trap of only looking at the data in certain pre-determined ways. For example, only looking at headline figures with no rural/urban breakdown or figures for certain geographical areas with no consideration for nos. of people affected can lead to an urban bias.

Lack of spatial awareness

Many of the problems experienced by policy writers in developing effectively rural proofed documents is that they are spatially 'blind' in determining and responding to need. This commonly means that there is the potential to be unaware of how their delivery approach matches up to the needs of the population, which is a major barrier to ensuring equitable resource distribution across a geographical area.

Many public sector bodies do not undertake comprehensive spatial analyses of the needs of the population in their area, or how their service delivery responds to these identified needs. Even where they do undertake spatial analyses such as these, there is a tendency to review the data produced in certain pre-determined ways. For example, to respond to fixed targets or by area rather than on the people in need. This has obvious implications for how the identified need may be responded to.

Lack of suitable tools or resources

Many policy makers are restricted in their ability to consider the potential impacts of their work on rural communities.

Clear practical guidance on how to undertake rural proofing is generally not provided to policy makers. The guidance which is available is often generic and therefore difficult to adapt to specific issues or themes. It is commonly worded in policy terms, rather than dealing with how and why the policy has been developed in the first place, what it intends to achieve and how rural fits into or may be affected by this structure.

This is further complicated by the fact that many of the existing limitations on rural proofing outlined so far in this paper are not included or explained in advisory documents. Therefore, many of the common pitfalls into which policy makers currently fall are not clearly identified and tend to be replicated time and again.

Current role of Action in rural Sussex

AirS is actively involved in undertaking and promoting rural proofing within the public sector.

- Through its membership of the West Sussex and East Sussex Rural Partnership's, Action in rural Sussex works to ensure that rural communities are considered during the development of public policy. This includes Sustainable Community Strategies and Local Area Agreements.
- AirS has worked to further the concept of the 'Rural Share of Deprivation' within the public sector as a means of outlining alternative methods for determining and monitoring need.
- As a member of the Rural Community Action Network, Action in rural Sussex works with other Rural Community Councils to share rural proofing best practice.
- Action in rural Sussex is an active participant in local and central government enquiries and consultations and works to ensure policy makers are made aware of the needs of rural communities.

Further reading and references

1. MAFF & DETR. (2000). *Our countryside: the future – A fair deal for rural England*.
2. Commission for Rural Communities. (2007). *Monitoring Rural Proofing 2007*. Commission for Rural Communities: Cheltenham.
3. Rural Innovation. (2008). *Rural Proofing Literature Review*. Report to the Commission for Rural Communities.
4. Commission for Rural Communities. (2006). *Monitoring Rural Proofing 2006*. Commission

Action in rural Sussex – Rural Proofing Recommendations:

1. The single most important element of rural proofing is ensuring that policy makers at all levels are aware of 'rural' areas and communities. Acknowledging that rural areas exist and that their needs may differ from urban areas is the first step on the road to undertaking integrated and effective rural proofing. Effective and tailored guidance on how to integrate rural proofing should be made available to all relevant bodies.

2. Central government must ensure that its own departments undertake thorough rural proofing of both the policies that they develop and the targets which they set for local government, statutory bodies and other agencies. It should set a clear example that rural proofing is extremely important and can be successfully incorporated into policy.

3. During the development or amendment of any public policy, both government and statutory agencies must ensure that the needs of all people are considered on an equitable basis. This should involve a comprehensive analysis which evaluates need on the basis of the numbers of people affected, whilst also establishing how individual and community needs may differ across an area.

4. The Index of Multiple Deprivation, which is currently the preferred method used by policy makers to identify priority areas, should not be used in isolation from other data sources. Instead it should form one part of a comprehensive list of datasets which is used in a multi-faceted approach to analyse and justify the distribution and delivery of public sector services.

5. Greater flexibility needs to be given to local authorities and delivery agencies in order to ensure that they are able to effectively deliver to rural areas on equitable terms without being penalised. Centralised targets possess some value in allowing comparison to be made across geographical areas, however, their construction needs to be carefully thought out to ensure that rural areas are not disadvantaged.

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