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# access all areas

meeting the  
needs of rural  
communities



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of rural communities

by Jemma Grieve

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Does your voluntary or community organisation work across both urban and rural areas? Or perhaps you are based in a town or city but support organisations across a wider area? If so you will be aware that although rural communities share many of the same needs as people living in urban areas, there are also times when, because of their location, needs are different or different approaches are needed.

To ensure you effectively meet the needs of rural communities and/or the voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) that serve them, you will need to take into account the needs of rural communities throughout your organisation's plans. This process, often known as 'rural proofing', may affect a range of your activities including design of service delivery, policy making and data collection methods.

This two-part guide seeks to provide VCOs with a starting point on how to incorporate rural proofing into their work. It is aimed at frontline VCOs and Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) infrastructure bodies who work across both urban and rural areas. The first section outlines the benefits of rural proofing. The second section provides a practical introduction to how you can rural proof your organisation's work.



## Part 1 Why Rural Proof?

### Why is rural proofing important?

The key reason to incorporate rural proofing into your work is to ensure you effectively meet the needs of all the communities you serve. Because of this, rural proofing is mandatory for central government departments. Rural proofing may form part of your wider diversity agenda, for example for the Citizens Advice, rural proofing forms part of their commitment to equality.

Rural proofing will allow you to gain a greater understanding of rural issues. This may enable you to increase your lobbying capacity to government, funders and other stakeholders. You are likely to attract more public support as well as volunteers, trustees and members from rural communities as a result of effectively meeting their needs.

Rural proofing can also act as a performance improvement tool with wider organisational benefits. Keith Wood (Rushcliffe Borough Council) highlights that rural proofing could be adapted to provide equity of opportunity to any sector of the community<sup>1</sup>. And Citizens Advice found that their experience of rural proofing was transferable: through their rural proofing process they identified issues they thought to be specifically rural. However, they found that many smaller bureaux were also affected by these issues and were able to apply their experience from rural proofing to them.

### How does rural proofing fit into other diversity planning?

Rural proofing should be viewed in the same light as other issues of diversity, and should not be treated as a separate process. It should be developed as part of existing procedures and may be high or low profile depending on your organisational objectives.

<sup>1</sup> Rural Proofing – Why Bother? – The East Midlands Pilot. Wood, K., 2004, Rushcliffe Borough Council, LGA Annual Rural Conference.

### How are rural communities different?

Rural communities have many similarities to their urban counterparts but their location means there can be some important differences.

Rural populations are spread over larger areas than in towns and cities, which can result in greater time and travel costs for people and the organisations that serve them. In addition, people may have to travel to towns to access public and private services as these services have increasingly left villages. Those without access to private transport may be marginalised because public transport infrastructure is often weak. To serve rural communities you will have to think carefully about how you can most effectively reach dispersed communities and how they can reach (or contact) you.

Deprivation does exist in rural areas, but because of its dispersed nature it is often hidden and may not be recognised by urban deprivation measures. It can be hard to tackle because many people do not seek support, as demonstrated by the low take-up of fuel poverty grants in rural areas<sup>2</sup>. It has been suggested that this may be caused by a range of factors including the traditional 'self-sufficiency' of rural communities, the fear of stigmatisation associated with accepting help and problems of confidentiality<sup>3</sup>. If your VCO has a rural remit you will need to understand and think about how you can adapt your work to overcome these barriers.

VCOs need to consider who they serve in rural areas. Rural communities often have a different demographic make-up to urban areas, for example with higher proportions of older people. Agriculture is no longer the biggest employer in rural areas but the land and natural factors such as seasonality retain an influence, for example communities may see an influx of seasonal migrant labour over peak agricultural periods.

These general characteristics give a flavour of rural areas. However, rural areas are diverse, ranging from 'chocolate box' villages to former industrial communities. It will be important to consider the particular characteristics of the rural areas you serve and how these affect the impact of your work.

<sup>2</sup> Rural Disadvantage: Reviewing the Evidence, 2006, Commission for Rural Communities.

<sup>3</sup> Supporting Rural Voluntary Action, Yates, H., 2002, NCVO.

## The Rural Voluntary and Community Sector

Although the rural VCS has many features in common with the VCS in general, there are some typical features it is important to recognise.

Many rural VCOs have developed to fill the gaps left by the public and private sector. They are often essential to the viability of rural communities. Compared to urban areas, they tend to be small but numerous: NCVO's research found that proportionally more charities are located in rural areas than urban areas<sup>4</sup>. Rural VCOs also rely more heavily on the support of volunteers. Voluntary activity is high in rural communities with people more likely to volunteer than in urban areas. However the smaller populations mean that there are less people available to volunteer and the ageing volunteer base raises sustainability concerns.

Due to their small size, limited resources and rural factors such as the difficulties of reaching dispersed communities, rural VCOs may need more time and resources to build into local networks and partnerships. They are less likely to be in contact with VCS infrastructure bodies, which can mean that their support needs are unmet. Rural VCOs may however work closely with their parish council, especially because cross-membership between parish councils and local VCOs is common. It is important that rural VCO infrastructure bodies consider what support local VCOs require and how this can best be provided.



<sup>4</sup> The UK Voluntary Sector Almanac: The State of the Sector, Wilding, K., Jochum, V., Clark, J., Griffith, M. and Wainwright, S. 2006, NCVO.

## Part 2 VCS Rural Proofing Guide

### How to Rural Proof?

This section of the guide is for VCOs who are ready to think about how they can put rural proofing into practice. Most existing advice and information on rural proofing is aimed at central and local government, but there is also much good practice within the voluntary and community sector. By combining guidance from existing tools with VCS good practice this section provides a starting point for rural proofing and signposts to further information. It is structured around five key themes that VCOs have identified as particularly important:

- People
- Designing delivery
- Working with rural communities
- Planning, monitoring and evaluation
- Are you ready to rural proof?

The suggestions below are not intended to be exhaustive and whilst you may find some helpful, you may feel others are not relevant to your organisation. In some cases rural proofing will reveal that the approach you take in urban areas is suitable for rural areas. In this case it is not necessary to make any changes – a separate rural approach should only be undertaken where necessary and relevant. Dip into the suggestions below to help get you started. By being flexible and innovative you should be able to find the best ways for your organisation to work with and serve rural communities.

Whatever methods you use to rural proof your organisation it is important that they are integrated into your work and planning as a matter of course alongside other diversity planning. Rural proofing as a late stage add-on is rarely effective.

### People

**Is everyone that works for your organisation informed about rural issues and are their rural proofing needs met?**

All staff, trustees and volunteers will need an understanding of rural needs and characteristics. It will be essential to prepare information

specifically on how rural proofing affects your organisation. However the type of information required by different people may vary:

- For new recruits information about rural proofing, such as the z-card that accompanies this guide, can be included in the induction process, for example, in induction packs.
- For existing workers the z-card or organisation specific information could be circulated.
- For those who have direct responsibilities for rural communities this guide could be circulated and they should be involved in developing specific organisational policies and guidance.

If resources are available, seminars, training courses and organisational visits can be useful. Inviting representatives of rural communities or organisations to your VCO has the additional benefit of allowing you to explain your role to them.<sup>5</sup>

**The Rural Stress Information Network's** Rural Stress Proofing toolkit contains separate guidance for different staff. For example, guidelines for frontline staff are around practical issues such as avoiding visits during the lambing season, whilst guidelines for managers are more strategic, including to develop working relationships with VCS bodies such as the local Rural Community Council.

*Rural Stress Proofing Toolkit*, 2005, Rural Stress Information Network, [www.ruralnet.org.uk/~rsin//stressproofing.htm](http://www.ruralnet.org.uk/~rsin//stressproofing.htm).

### Would it help to have a Rural Proofing Champion in your organisation?

Commitment to rural proofing needs to run throughout your organisation at all levels. This ensures rural proofing is sustainable and helps reflect the diversity of rural areas. It can however be useful to appoint a Rural Proofing Champion to facilitate and drive rural proofing. The champion could be a trustee with a rural portfolio, a volunteer or even a dedicated Rural Officer.

<sup>5</sup> Rural Issues Services Strategy: A Plan for Rural Areas, The Samaritans, [www.samaritans.org/know/information/rural\\_strategy.shtm](http://www.samaritans.org/know/information/rural_strategy.shtm).

### How can change be managed?

Introducing rural proofing will involve change and may challenge organisational culture. It will be important to consider how to support and encourage everyone working for your organisation to take on rural proofing. They will need to be aware of the benefits of rural proofing and its relevance to their work.

### Is the value of local rural volunteers recognised and supported?

Local rural volunteers can be invaluable in helping your organisation to understand rural needs. They will often have a better knowledge of local circumstances and better access to local resources than staff operating out of a centralised office. They may additionally be able to make links with local community groups. To recruit and retain rural volunteers it is essential that they are made to feel valued and that you enable them to contribute.

### Designing delivery

If your organisation delivers services or information you may find, as a result of rural proofing, that traditional methods of delivery are not appropriate for rural communities. As we have already outlined, most organisations will face similar challenges related to serving dispersed communities. However, it is important to consider whether there are challenges specific to your organisation and the particular communities you serve. Some Citizens Advice Bureaux have encountered difficulties finding suitable premises in rural areas that meet their confidentiality requirements. Rural areas do not offer the anonymity that urban areas can and with smaller populations and fewer buildings it can be easy to see who is using which service.

### What methods of delivery are appropriate to reach rural communities?

You may be able to tailor your methods of delivery to reach rural communities. Multi-service outlets, where several services are delivered from one building, can be useful especially where there are few community buildings. They also allow you to pool resources with other organisations. Mobile units and outreach services including home visits, may be helpful for those with no access to transport and reduce the need to travel long distances to an urban centre. In addition telephone and internet contact can be helpful. It is however important not to rely

on any one method as a sole source of delivery. Using a range of delivery methods should allow you to reach a greater range of people.

**Mind** have found Teleconferencing a useful tool to both deliver training to staff in separate rural locations and facilitate support groups for people across wide geographical areas.

*Rural Issues in Mental Health*, 2006, Mind, [www.mind.org.uk/Information/Factsheets/Rural+issues+in+mental+health.htm](http://www.mind.org.uk/Information/Factsheets/Rural+issues+in+mental+health.htm).

**Age Concern** have used multi-service outlets, for example, where a post office 'visits' a rural day centre site. They found that sharing sites is not only convenient for users but that by integrating services, each service was more likely to survive than if delivered in isolation.

*The Hidden Store*, Le Mesurier, N., 2003, Age Concern England.

### Does your information reach rural communities?

Information points in rural areas can be scarce and you will need to think of range of possible places. These could include the public (mobile) library, the local shop, the local pub, church, village hall and sometimes the post office. You will also need to use a variety of media, for example using, parish, church and local authority newsletters, local papers and village websites. Some organisations have found that the most effective way to disseminate information in rural areas is by word of mouth.

**Mind** runs its information line through telephone and email and maintains a comprehensive website that is updated daily.

*Rural Issues in Mental Health*, 2006, Mind, [www.mind.org.uk/Information/Factsheets/Rural+issues+in+mental+health.htm](http://www.mind.org.uk/Information/Factsheets/Rural+issues+in+mental+health.htm).

### Could your work be delivered in partnership?

Partnership working with organisations from the VCS and from other sectors allows many benefits including skills sharing, additional resources and avoiding duplication. This can be particularly important in rural communities. Partnership working can be challenging and it is important to examine the possible benefits and risks at the outset. In addition, specific challenges exist in rural areas including working over large areas<sup>6</sup> and with partners who often have limited resources. However, where appropriate, partnership working can be very effective.

<sup>6</sup> Exclusive countryside? Social inclusion and regeneration in rural areas, Shucksmith, M., 2000, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

To provide day care services in rural areas **Cumbria Social Services** have worked in partnership with Age Concern and the Alzheimer's Society. As a result they have developed a successful project called 'Host homes' where volunteers entertain elderly people in their own homes.

*Thinking rural: your essential guide*, 2004, Cumbria County Council, [www.cumbria.gov.uk/ruralmatters/learning/ruralproofing.asp](http://www.cumbria.gov.uk/ruralmatters/learning/ruralproofing.asp)

### Have you asked rural communities what delivery methods they would like?

When delivering services to any community it is recognised as good practice to give communities a voice on how services should be delivered. This is being promoted by the Government. When doing this in rural areas it is worth investigating whether the area you serve has produced a parish plan and how this may influence the work of your organisation. The parish plan process identifies local priorities through consultation with the local community as well as with local businesses and VCOs.

## Working with Rural Communities

### Are local communities engaged in your work?

When working with any local community it is important that you engage the community in your work. Age Concern found that to deliver services successfully in rural areas they must be owned by the community and developed using a bottom-up approach. They found that community ownership can help increase sustainability, for instance if local links are retained, a service is less likely to close due to lack of volunteer support or lack of information about need or availability of resources.<sup>7</sup> If you respond to specific local issues in rural areas you may find that you naturally develop a local focus, however this section will outline several practices that can help.

### Have you consulted local communities?

As with urban communities, one way to gain the views of the local community is through consultation. Different methods will be appropriate in different circumstances but might include surveys, focus groups, planning for real<sup>®</sup>, citizens' panels, exhibitions, area

<sup>7</sup> The Hidden Store - the contributions of older people to rural communities, Le Mesurier, N., 2003, Age Concern England.

forums or public meetings. It is important to recognise that a market town may not be the most accessible place to hold consultations for rural communities. And to reach whole communities it is important to ensure that you offer support with travel costs or where possible, with childcare. Consultation methods used in urban areas are not always directly transferable to rural areas. For instance, the smaller size of communities in rural areas means that people may feel their comments are attributable. They are also more likely to have taken part in consultations before and may suffer from ‘consultation fatigue’.<sup>8</sup> It might be possible to join up with other planned consultations or to learn from previous consultations such as parish plans.

### Do you know who to talk to?

Rural areas have a distinct organisational and political infrastructure. As a first point of call you may find it helpful to contact the local parish or town council, Rural Community Council and County Association of Local Councils as well as using existing contacts such as your local Council for Voluntary Service. However, there may be other key players including local VCOs and faith-based organisations. It can also be helpful to build relationships with key people to access wider networks in rural communities, especially since people in rural areas often ‘wear several hats’. For example, a parish councillor will often also volunteer for a community group. However it is important to remember that there may be other people in the community that are under-represented and that there are communities of interest as well as place in rural areas.

### Is your organisation perceived as an urban organisation?

The way your organisation is seen as a national body or a local group can have an impact on how successfully you reach rural communities. For instance the Samaritans found that part of the reason their services had a proportionally lower take-up in rural areas was because they were perceived as a predominantly urban-based organisation. To help tackle this they took on two temporary Rural Links Officers and developed a Plan for Rural Areas.<sup>9</sup> Promoting the fact that your organisation serves rural communities is a good way to give greater visibility to your rural proofing process and to demonstrate your commitment to equality.

<sup>8</sup> Consultation in Rural Areas: What’s so different about that? Evison, I., 2002, Jigsaw Magazine.

<sup>9</sup> Rural Issues Services Strategy: A Plan for Rural Areas, The Samaritans, [www.samaritans.org/know/information/rural\\_strategy.shtm](http://www.samaritans.org/know/information/rural_strategy.shtm).

The East Midlands Rural Affairs Forum’s project ‘think rural’ allows those who sign up to the East Midlands Rural Charter to display a certificate and use the Rural Charter logo with the caption “We think rural. (organisation name) is a member of the East Midlands Rural Charter committed to making a positive impact on the region’s rural areas”.

*Think Rural*, East Midlands Rural Affairs Forum, [www.ruralaffairs.org.uk/practice.htm](http://www.ruralaffairs.org.uk/practice.htm).

## Planning, monitoring and evaluation

### Do you have data on the rural areas you serve?

Using data on the rural areas you serve to inform your plans can play an important part in your rural proofing process. Rural data may be acquired through the Office of National Statistics, Local Authorities and parish plans. Although quantitative data on rural needs is important, softer data, such as community perceptions, views and expectations will also be needed. It is important to share information sources and to remember that other agencies may hold information that is useful to your organisation.<sup>10</sup>

### Is rural proofing integrated in your organisation’s plans?

To ensure rural proofing is proactive rather than reactive it should be integrated into your planning process from its early stages. Integrating rural proofing into your plans means that you can collect and/or use rural data and consult rural communities to find the best way of supporting them rather than just adapting your existing urban approach. It can also help avoid risk, for instance, if you deliver services in rural areas this can cost more than delivery in urban areas, so it is important to properly cost the service at the outset.

### How do you ensure you are successfully serving rural communities?

To ensure that your organisation is successfully reaching rural communities and areas it will be important that you monitor and evaluate your work. One way of doing this is to make sure that a rural example is included when studies are carried out or pilot programmes

<sup>10</sup> Rural Proofing in Unitary Local Authorities in England, Spencer, K. and Rogers, S. 2005, Countryside Agency.

are run. This will help you to decide what ways of rural proofing are most appropriate for your organisation and the data collected can be fed back into your planning process.

### Are your plans backed up by action?

Finally it is important to ensure that your plans do not just result in a strategic document but that they are backed up with practical action.

### Are you ready to rural proof?

#### Are sufficient resources available for rural proofing?

Until rural proofing is embedded in your systems, rural proofing may require additional resources in terms of both time and money. You will also need to remember that actions such as delivering services in rural areas are more resource intensive than in urban areas. These factors may mean you are not able to embed rural proofing as fully as you would like. However, the Commission for Rural Communities believe it is possible to slowly introduce rural proofing by finding easy entry points and then building on key wins.

**One Age Concern** Chief Officer with experience of both urban and rural working estimated that it can take three times as long to develop a service in the countryside as in the town.

*The Hidden Store*, Le Mesurier, N., 2003, Age Concern England.

#### Are your plans for rural areas and communities sustainable?

It is important to consider whether your actions as a result of rural proofing are sustainable. For example, when delivering services it is important to consider whether, if your work is successful, it will be possible to develop it beyond the pilot or pump-priming stage. If you raise expectations in an area and then withdraw services there is a risk of a long-term negative effect for your organisation's reputation.

### Next Steps

Now you have read this guide it is time to put rural proofing into practice. This guide has highlighted the importance of rural proofing to effectively meet the needs of rural communities. Now it is up to you to consider how this fits into your mission and organisational objectives. If you would like to make sure others in your organisation are aware of rural proofing, more copies of this guide and the accompanying z-card can be downloaded or ordered from [www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/ruralproofing](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/ruralproofing). Alternatively you may want to create your own guidance, specific to your organisation. If you would like to know more about rural proofing details of further information are included in the final part of this guide.

### Further Information

#### Voluntary and Community Sector Guides

- **Mind** have published a range of work relevant to rural proofing including:
    - Rural Policy Toolkit*, 2005, Mind.  
[www.mind.org.uk/About+Mind/Networks/ruralMinds/RMT.htm](http://www.mind.org.uk/About+Mind/Networks/ruralMinds/RMT.htm)  
A three-part guide on how to implement their policy on rural issues and mental health.
    - Rural Proofing* the National Service Framework for Mental Health, Elder, K., 2004, Mind.  
[www.mind.org.uk/About+Mind/Networks/ruralMinds/RPR.htm](http://www.mind.org.uk/About+Mind/Networks/ruralMinds/RPR.htm)  
A detailed document originally intended to rural proof the National Service Framework for Mental Health but that goes much wider than this.
    - Rural Issues in Mental Health*, 2006, Mind.  
[www.mind.org.uk/Information/Factsheets/Rural+issues+in+mental+health.htm](http://www.mind.org.uk/Information/Factsheets/Rural+issues+in+mental+health.htm)  
A factsheet detailing issues relating to mental health that are specific to or require different solutions in rural areas.
- For more information visit the Rural Mind's webpages:  
[www.mind.org.uk/About+Mind/Networks/ruralMinds/](http://www.mind.org.uk/About+Mind/Networks/ruralMinds/)

- **The Rural Stress Information Network**, produced *Guidelines for Rural Stress Proofing*, (2005) with the Rural Stress Action Plan Working Group to help policy makers, managers and agencies understand the causes and effects of rural stress. It includes information targeted at different members of staff and advice on being an agent of change.

The Guidelines are available at:

[www.ruralnet.org.uk/~rsin//stressproofing.htm](http://www.ruralnet.org.uk/~rsin//stressproofing.htm)

- **Citizens Advice** have produced a Rural Proofing Checklist. This short paper helps individuals within Citizens Advice to consider the different needs of rural CAB and their clients through a series of themed questions.

The checklist is available at: [www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/ruralproofing](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/ruralproofing)

- **The Samaritans** have produced a promotional flier, Rural Issues Services Strategy: A Plan for Rural Areas. This outlines how they are embedding rural proofing into their work and contains useful suggestions especially around organisational structure, making links with other organisations and branding.

The plan is available at:

[www.samaritans.org.uk/know/pdf/ruralplans.pdf](http://www.samaritans.org.uk/know/pdf/ruralplans.pdf)



## Government Guides

- **The Countryside Agency/Commission for Rural Communities** have published a range of material on Rural Proofing aimed at government including: an annual report on Rural Proofing in central and regional Government; a checklist for policy makers; and a guide for local authorities and LSP members.

Please note that the Countryside Agency no longer exists and you should look at the Commission for Rural Communities', website for information. The Commission was established in April 2005 and became an independent body on 1 October 2006. Legacy material from the Countryside Agency can be found on the Commission's website at: [www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk//projects/ruralproofing/overview](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk//projects/ruralproofing/overview)

- Although aimed at local authorities, the **Improvement and Development Agency** website has a large range of rural proofing resources and information that you may find helpful including case studies and toolkits.

For more information visit:

[www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=300459](http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=300459)

- **Cumbria County Council**, published a guide to rural proofing *Thinking rural: your essential guide* (2004). Although aimed at their staff and at Cumbria in particular there is some general information and transferable advice that you may find helpful.

The guide is available at:

[www.cumbria.gov.uk/ruralmatters/learning/ruralproofing.asp](http://www.cumbria.gov.uk/ruralmatters/learning/ruralproofing.asp).

- **East Midlands Rural Affairs Forum** have published a rural charter: *Think Rural* to encourage organisations and companies to take rural issues into account.

The charter is available at: [www.ruralaffairs.org.uk/practice.htm](http://www.ruralaffairs.org.uk/practice.htm).

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This guide forms part of NCVO's programme of research and policy development, focussing specifically on the needs of voluntary and community organisations working in rural areas. We aim to increase awareness and understanding of the scope and impact of rural voluntary activity and develop and promote policy to support the work of the voluntary sector in rural areas. NCVO's rural work is funded by the Commission for Rural Communities.

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