

Local Level Rural Proofing

Resource #2: Rural proofing in practice

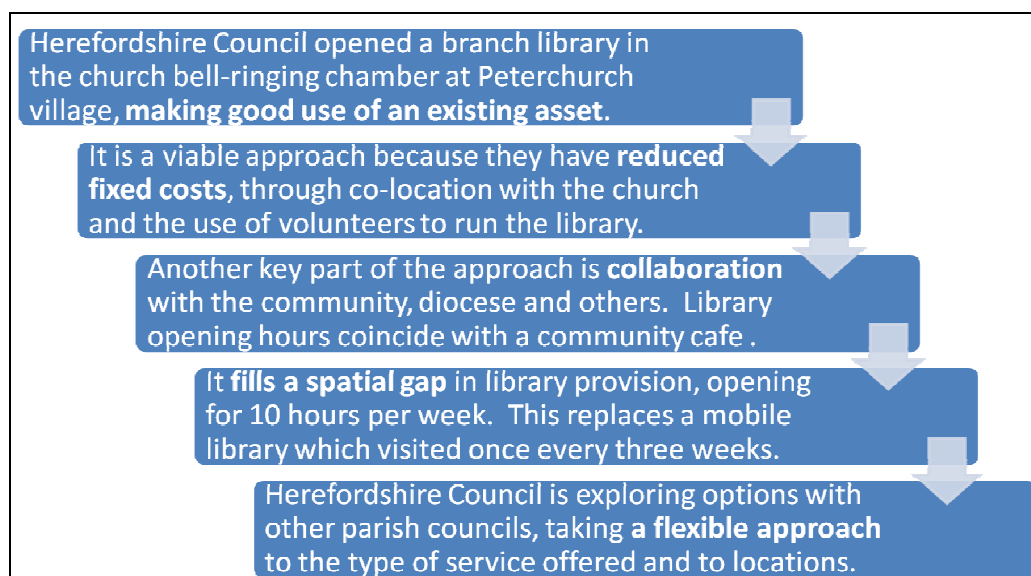
July 2012

Rural proofing in practice

This is the second of a small suite of local level rural proofing resources, which aim to meet practitioners' calls for access to better information on how to design and deliver publicly funded services in rural areas. The papers have been produced as outputs from a research project undertaken by Rural Innovation. The project was funded by the Rural Communities Policy Unit in Defra and carried out in association with the organisations whose logos appear below.

The first of the resources¹ provides a short explanation of why rural proofing is a valuable approach to embed in the design, commissioning and delivery of local services. This second 'Insights' document identifies key drivers behind the emerging policy context for rural proofing and showcases a set of common principles and strategies which have been found to underpin the successful design, commissioning and delivery of services in rural areas. Their application is illustrated using a few real world examples.

Figure One: Principles in Practice



A slide pack² is also available for anyone who prefers to view the information in that format or who wishes to share or present it to others.

The information in this document can be applied by anyone who is involved with local service design and delivery, whether from the public, private or civil society sectors, and whether that involvement is strategic or focused on implementation.

¹ Resource #1: What is rural proofing and what are the benefits?

² Resource #3: Rural proofing in practice

Clearly it is a matter for the organisations responsible for designing, commissioning and delivery of local services to decide whether application of these principles will add value. They will also want to tailor their use to local circumstances.

The sponsors of these Local Level Rural Proofing resources welcome any feedback from users about them and their application.

Policy drivers

Legislation and other national policy developments are bringing about important changes in the way that local policy is developed and delivered. These changes can readily be characterised across six types of policy driver:

- Localisation – where decisions about service design, commissioning and delivery are taken closer to and based on engagement with service users;
- Personalisation – further encouragement for bespoke and locally-specific service delivery approaches;
- Collaboration – a loosening of organisational boundaries, with scope for more integrated service delivery, often with a focus on place;
- Open access – greater opportunities for new service providers to enter the market from outside the statutory sector;
- Volunteering – a desire to involve local people and organisations in service planning and delivery; and
- Growth – an emphasis upon development which better meets economic and housing needs.

These drivers can be seen as common threads which run through a range of recent Government policy initiatives, such as its Open Public Services White Paper, the Localism Act 2011, the education White Paper, the Health & Social Care Act, the roll out of social care direct payments and personal budgets, the Treasury's Growth Review, the National Planning Policy Framework and the Housing Strategy for England³.

The policy drivers are not exclusively rural – they will affect service design and delivery in all places – but each is likely to have a rural dimension. For example, moves to devolve services seem more likely to involve the parish and town councils tier in rural areas. Encouraging new entrant providers to operate in rural areas, with their lower populations, may require additional measures or incentives. Collaboration between organisations across administrative boundaries may be especially useful for rural communities whose nearest town service centre is in a neighbouring administrative area. Aspects of the personalisation agenda, such as offering users more choice of services, may prove more challenging to deliver in rural areas.

These policy drivers are likely to shape the context for design and delivery of publicly funded services over the next few years. Those involved in these activities will therefore need to consider their influence and respond accordingly.

³ This is by no means an exhaustive list of the relevant policy initiatives.



Efficient and effective design and delivery

Analysis of a wide range of examples of good practice in service design and delivery in rural areas has highlighted a number of ‘underlying principles’ and strategies which appear again and again. Services which make use of these in their design and delivery are likely to operate effectively and to generate positive outcomes in rural areas. Identifying which of the underlying principles are relevant and useful to local circumstances and incorporating them within design and delivery from the outset will help you to achieve the best possible outcomes from public investment.

These principles are presented below as a set of common features, each offered with a supporting explanation of what the headline description means in practice.

It is important to note that:

- a) The nature of these underlying principles means they are well suited to local variation in needs and circumstances. They offer a menu of approaches and are not prescriptive. Applied effectively within service design, commissioning and delivery they will help to promote an understanding of spatial differences.
- b) The underlying principles have been successfully applied across different rural places⁴, from remote or upland areas through to commuter belts or places near to the urban periphery.
- c) They can be applied to any type of service, whether that is education, healthcare, social services, policing, economic development, planning, housing or something else.
- d) They can be applied to a range of processes, including:
 - Policy or strategy development;
 - Service planning and design;
 - Option appraisals;
 - Budget management exercises;
 - Procurement and commissioning;
 - Project development or testing;
 - Review or scrutiny of performance and impact across service areas.
- e) The principles are relevant to all types of user. They can be used by organisations or community groups in their own service design and delivery. They can also be used to inform engagement with other service providers, as stakeholders or interest groups, where they may help to structure thinking, develop an argument or in developing responses to consultation exercises.

The principles in practice

⁴ The Office for National Statistics and Defra define rural settlements as those with fewer than 10,000 residents. A full explanation of the definition can be found at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/rural/what-is-rural/>



The three 'practice insights' below demonstrate how these underlying principles are found within the design and delivery of successful policy and services for rural areas. The examples given are not case studies – at least, not in any traditional sense. Although they may inspire similar actions elsewhere, their main purpose is to illustrate the application of the underlying principles to rural proofing the design and delivery of services and, in so doing, to help bring the underlying principles to life.

In each instance individual underlying principles are identified in bold font. Further detail about all eighteen underlying principles is provided in the section which follows these 'practice insights'.

Herefordshire's library service

In early 2010 Herefordshire Council opened a new branch library in the bell ringing chamber of the village church at Peterchurch. Although it is increasingly common to find branch libraries **making use of existing assets** (such as village schools and community halls), this particular location may yet be unique.

The library in Peterchurch requires some professional support from the Council's library service, but it is operated on a daily basis by a group of around a dozen local volunteers who have undergone training. In Peterchurch and in some other rural locations the Council is managing to **draw upon community support** to deliver services, often working with Parish Councils.

Unsurprisingly, introducing this static library provision to Peterchurch has only been possible because the model adopted is relatively low-cost. Herefordshire Council still funds the book stock, contributes to church running costs and offers professional back-up. However, **fixed costs are significantly reduced** as a result of co-location with the church and the use of volunteers.

The approach depends heavily upon **collaboration**, most obviously with the diocese and the local community, though also with other service units in the Council. A Children's Centre operated by the Children's Services team holds sessions within the church. Library opening hours are timed to follow a 'bounce and rhyme session' for young children and to coincide with a community cafe which takes place inside the church.

The library **fills a spatial gap** in the provision of library services, since residents now have a branch which they can access locally for 10 hours per week. This offers improved access to the service, compared with the mobile provision which existed previously and which visited every three weeks for a 3.5 hour stay. At the request of local residents the library opening hours include Saturday mornings and an after-school session. Remaining **user focused** is a critical part of the initiative's success.

The Council undertook a review after the Peterchurch library had been operational for a few months, to give it some early **monitoring of local outcomes** and to learn lessons for the future. Gathering views from the volunteers was a key part of this exercise. [In 2011/2012 this facility attracted around 3000 users who collectively borrowed almost 5000 items.]

Herefordshire Council is exploring options for library provision with many of its rural communities. New services have already commenced in nine places and two more schemes are at the planning stage. These differ from Peterchurch in being a community-run book borrowing service, supported by the Council's Customer Services Department. This means they act as a front desk for a wide range of



Council services and not just the library service, so **reducing** the Council's **fixed costs**.

Herefordshire Council has adopted a highly **flexible approach**, asking communities if they want such a service and where it might best be (co)located. In their words, “we’re not saying it has to be like a, b or c”. Typically they take place alongside some other event, such as the monthly market in the village hall at Garway. Across these new sites the number of library users has almost doubled, compared with the mobile provision they replaced.

Contact: Jonathan Chedzoy at Herefordshire Council

Shropshire’s Core Strategy and Place Plans

In 2011 Shropshire Council published its Adopted Core Strategy⁵, which “aims to deliver more sustainable places at all levels and in both urban and rural settings”.

The Council emphasises that rurality was a key consideration within the ‘thought process’ of putting this document together. This approach flows from the Council’s corporate **rural commitment**, which has been led very visibly by its senior officers and elected members, as well as by the wider Shropshire Partnership.

The Core Strategy, which looks forward to 2026, aims to enable Shropshire’s market towns and rural settlements to become more sustainable. A key element to the Council’s objective of **creating sustainable places** is a focus on the “rebalancing of rural communities”, through delivery of local housing and employment opportunities appropriate to the size and function of each settlement. The Core Strategy seeks to improve the supply of affordable housing, tackle certain economic concerns and enhance the viability of local services in rural areas.

A crucial early step in the preparation of the Core Strategy was detailed analysis and mapping of the evidence base, to understand Shropshire’s characteristics, relevant trends and likely future changes. The “spatial portrait” produced provides a clear **understanding of local geography** and functionality, with the county town (Shrewsbury), six large market towns, eleven small market towns or key centres, and many smaller settlements. It led to the designation of five spatial zones in the county, with an assessment against each of the community, economic and environmental issues.

The Core Strategy has been developed and will be implemented through engagement and interaction between the Council and local communities. Information generated by previous Parish Planning activity fed directly in to the evidence base, whilst information from ongoing community-led planning continues to inform needs assessments and shape local solutions. This has ensured that the policy context is built from **first principles** and designed with a view to generating a **range of positive outcomes**. Shropshire Council uses a Community Toolkit approach to run events with local communities, where it tests (or reality checks) its own evidence base and identifies what people see as local priorities for investment.

The results of this range of engagement activity feed into eighteen **user focused** Place Plans which, between them, cover the county. The Core Strategy sets “aspirational targets” for the level of growth envisaged in the county over the plan

⁵ Available at [http://www.shropshire.gov.uk/planningpolicy.nsf/viewAttachments/EWET-8PQDRK/\\$file/shropshire-core-strategy-2011.pdf](http://www.shropshire.gov.uk/planningpolicy.nsf/viewAttachments/EWET-8PQDRK/$file/shropshire-core-strategy-2011.pdf)



period, but gives only a broad indication of the distribution of that growth across the different spatial areas. That distribution is determined through a Site Allocation and Management of Development process, which is also undertaken in partnership with local communities and their councillors.

Communities have, so far, reacted very positively to this approach and have shown considerable interest in hosting development. One factor in favour being the prospect of extra local funding raised through the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) on developers. One example is the village of Worthen in the Bishops Castle Place Plan area which was previously subject to very restrictive 'countryside settlement' policies. Worthen's parish council wants to use development to help sustain the village, both in terms of services/facilities and having a balanced population. A key local aspiration is to use any CIL money from new development to fund pavements and traffic calming on its main road. Another example is Whixhall (in the Wem Place Plan area) where a cluster of eight settlements within the parish are looking to share the benefits from development of around 30 houses.

Contact: Lois Dale at Shropshire Council

Malvern Hills Rural Access Project

The Malvern Hills Partnership Rural Access Project aims to understand and respond to issues of poor access to services, especially for vulnerable residents. The project came about because the Partnership felt that rural accessibility issues could be addressed more coherently.

The starting point for the project was the commissioning of a detailed analysis of need carried out at the lowest possible level (Census Output Area⁶ level), in order to fully **understand the local geography**. This analysis showed rural pockets of deprivation previously masked from policy makers and service providers by the area's affluent reputation. The assessment found that overall levels of deprivation were the same in the district's rural and urban areas; but being scattered or in small pockets it was much less visible in the rural areas.

The next stage of the project involved qualitative research, interviewing rural residents who had recently been through life-changing events, such as loss of a partner, loss of a job or the onset of serious ill health. This research identified three key issues: the importance of social and support networks; that access to transport often worsens with life-changing events; and that poor broadband availability means it cannot be relied upon to plug gaps in physical service provision.

The analysis led the Partnership to focus the rest of the project on **hard to reach groups** in two wards, one of which contains a large village and the other which is very sparsely populated. They have been mapping services and facilities in these areas, and how they are used, to better understand any **spatial gaps** in service provision.

This **user focussed** approach to accessibility has led the project team to identify the need for a number of policy solutions. Malvern Hills District Council says that their approach will be about "trying to find ways that work for our communities".

One response being explored is a community-run transport scheme, which would help those with transport needs by taking them to join existing public transport

⁶ The smallest spatial units for which Census and certain other statistics are made available.



routes. Another option is to explore whether the places where people meet, such as village shops, could act as more of a general service hub and information point. Making better **use of existing assets** is seen as an effective way forward.

A third consideration is the development of a Village Agent scheme, where local volunteers stay in regular contact with vulnerable (older) residents and bring any issues they spot to the attention of relevant authorities or support organisations. There may be scope to **collaborate** on this approach with the Primary Care Trust, since it appears to want a similar scheme to be progressed.

An important feature of the Partnership's emerging approach is that it **starts from first principles**. The issues and how they play out locally are what is driving the design of solutions.

The Rural Access Project is **a pilot** covering two of the twenty-two wards in Malvern Hills district. If the approach is successful the longer term aim is to roll it out elsewhere, recognising that each area will need its own tailored solutions. One lesson has been the importance of **flexibility**, by offering a mix of approaches which will improve access.

Contact: David Rolls at Malvern Hills District Council

The principles in detail

The eighteen underlying principles which have been identified as important in shaping successful rural services are shown below, allocated across three headings. Namely: those which are largely strategic and cross-cutting; those which relate mostly to service design; and those which relate mostly to service commissioning and delivery. It should be noted, however, this sub-division is not a perfect fit and readers are encouraged to consider them all, regardless of the focus of their work.

Underlying principles which are strategic and cross-cutting		
1	Making an upfront commitment	An overt and upfront commitment from service designers to provide fair, inclusive and equitable treatment for users and to achieve proportionate outcomes in rural and urban places.
2	Seeking broad outcomes	Factoring in broad outcomes which enhance the future sustainability of rural communities as design objectives or within the criteria for assessing return on investment.
3	Understanding geography	Investing in understanding local circumstances and the impact of geography on service costs and use, in order to inform the design of evidence-based solutions.

Underlying principles relating mostly to service design		
4	Harnessing rural strengths	Approaches to service design which seek to address the fundamental challenges of rural delivery (sparsity, distance, etc) by harnessing and enhancing strengths within rural communities (social capital, self-reliance, etc).
5	Reducing fixed costs	Finding ways to spread or reduce the fixed costs of



		service delivery, so as to mitigate increased unit costs of delivery arising from distance/time and lost economies of scale (the rural premium). This may involve joint-working by organisations, services co-locating, the use of ICT, volunteer input or various other approaches.
6	Accounting for a range of outcomes	Taking into account a broad range of potential outcomes (economic, social and environmental) when assessing options for rural delivery beyond unit cost or a simplistic value for money based assessment.
7	Taking a user focused approach	Involving rural communities in the early stage of needs assessment and service planning, and then involving them in shaping appropriate local solutions.
8	Starting from first principles	Starting the dialogue with rural communities from first principles, asking what their needs are and how they wish to use services rather than simply adjusting current service models.
9	Considering settlement inter-dependencies	Considering settlement (including urban-rural) inter-dependencies and the scope to maximise the benefits for rural communities arising from them.
10	Designing in flexibility	Designing sufficient flexibility into delivery models, so they can be adapted to local circumstance or opportunity.
11	Using existing assets	Designing solutions to increase the use of existing assets within rural areas (e.g. buildings, land and transport) in order to enhance their viability.

Underlying principles relating mostly to service commissioning and delivery		
12	Offering a portfolio of solutions	Offering a portfolio of delivery solutions to meet the varying needs and circumstances of rural areas.
13	Targeting spatial gaps in provision	Targeting geographic gaps in delivery so that services are readily accessible to more (potential) users, especially those in remoter or more isolated locations.
14	Focusing on hard-to-reach groups	Focusing particular effort (and perhaps financial support) at those groups who find it hardest to access existing services. This may involve tailored solutions for individuals or investing in one service (e.g. village agents) so that others can be more effectively delivered.
15	Using incentives or penalties in contracts	Service commissioners seeking to avoid spatial gaps in provision by including incentives or penalties within contracts, to avoid market failure among providers.
16	Seeking collaborative approaches	Looking to collaborate beyond boundaries of individual services or perhaps across administrative boundaries, so that economies of scale can be achieved and



		additional outcomes are delivered.
17	Testing approaches before mainstreaming	Testing new delivery approaches in small areas (as pilots) in order to gain sufficient evidence, learning and support for their mainstream use.
18	Monitoring at local levels	Recording and monitoring at lower or local levels of geography (commensurate with local delivery) and reviewing the outputs regularly to seek further rural service enhancements.

The supporting organisations hope that you find these underlying principles useful when considering the design, commissioning and delivery of services across your territory. If you would like to share them with colleagues or organisations that you work with you may wish to use a slide pack version of this paper⁷ as a presentation tool.

⁷ Resource #3: Rural proofing in practice



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<mailto:ruralresearch@defra.gsi.gov.uk>

