

## Defra investment in RCAN/ACRE 2011-15: mid-term evaluation

### Case study: Providing rural intelligence (pillar 3)

#### Defra use of RCAN intelligence

##### Context

Defra's funding of the Rural Communities Action Network (RCAN) has been used for intelligence gathering to support local and national policy-making and monitoring. This gathering of grass-roots intelligence is an input to the work of Defra's Rural Communities Policy Unit (RCPU), which works across Whitehall to build rural thinking into departmental policy making. It assists 'rural proofing' and helps identify rural success factors or barriers to national policy implementation. This forms pillar 3 of the Defra investment programme 2011-15 in RCAN.

Intelligence has been gathered regularly by the 38 local RCAN members and submitted to Defra in summary reports which are compiled by ACRE (the RCAN national umbrella body). These intelligence reports have covered six topics which are: housing and planning; community led planning; transport and services; community-owned assets; fuel poverty and energy generation; and broadband. The reports typically contained local intelligence about three or four issues that were identified against each of the topics.

The submission of intelligence (in monitoring reports) can also generate one-to-one follow-up contact between Defra and ACRE, where items spark particular interest or they need clarification. Defra sometimes requests supplementary written intelligence where it seeks specific information about topical policy concerns.

Local RCAN members can also join ACRE-managed expert Reference Groups. In some cases policy makers from other Government Departments have attended these, allowing for a three-way dialogue between ACRE/RCAN, Defra and the responsible policy Department.

This regular flow of intelligence to Defra has been of different types:

- Noting trends and innovations in local community action in rural areas;
- Providing evidence of the extent and shape of rural community engagement with new policy initiatives;
- Identifying factors that may facilitate or obstruct policy implementation in rural areas;
- Raising concerns about the way certain national policy decisions affect rural communities and services;
- Describing the rural impacts of reducing budgets or changing funding allocations.

This case study examines how that intelligence has been used by Defra to make an impact on its work with the Department of Health (DH) and the Department of Transport (DfT).

##### What happened

###### Minimum Practice Income Guarantee

The Minimum Practice Income Guarantee (MPIG) had been introduced in 2004 to support some GP practices when they moved on to the new General Medical Services (nGMS) contract. The MPIG was used to top up those practices' core funding – their 'global sum payments' – so that it matched their basic income levels before the nGMS was introduced. It

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was recognition by the Department of Health that some (often rural) practices had markedly fewer patients on their list than is typical elsewhere and that payment based purely on list size would work against them. If GP surgeries were to remain accessible to some rural communities then a compensatory element in their income was needed.

When the Department of Health made plans to withdraw MPIG and instead pool the resources so that they could be distributed to all GP surgeries across England, RCAN network intelligence reports to Defra were able to show how there could be a significant impact in rural areas.

Specifically, the intelligence reports from RCAN highlighted that two surgeries within the Esk valley could lose a combined total of £130,000 in NHS income. A staged withdrawal of 14% per year over seven years, RCAN members argued, would have an impact on efficiency and quality of service. The practices were facing the prospect of losing one GP each.

Intelligence reports provided similar evidence from Slaidburn Health Centre in Yorkshire. The GP surgery, clinics and a pharmacy could all have been at risk from anticipated cuts of nearly £100,000 (annually) after seven years. It would have made the service unviable.

The specific and quantitative nature of this RCAN intelligence meant that Defra could readily use it in discussions with the Department of Health to reinforce other evidence that there was an unintended rural consequence to this policy that needed addressing. Rural GPs were also raising the issue of their reliance on MPIG with their members of parliament. This and the RCAN intelligence helped to establish that some sort of intervention was required to protect rural GPs.

### Rural transport

The Transport expert Reference Group has been an active forum to link practical action on the ground, through RCAN members, with Defra. Increasingly, the group has been attended by representatives of third parties such as the Community Transport Association and the Wheels 2 Work (W2W) national forum. One recent action from this collaboration has been a short questionnaire circulated to all local authorities in England which aims to establish their attitudes to the W2W programme<sup>1</sup>. The expert group had identified inconsistencies in local support for W2W schemes leading to fragmented delivery. The results of the survey will be followed up by Defra and the aim is to foster a national approach to W2W development.

One of the current priorities for the group is access to health and well-being services. A recent problem discussed by the group, when joined by a senior official from Department of Health, was rural inconsistencies around non-emergency transport to hospital. RCAN members are following up the points identified by sourcing local examples which will be used to brief Ministers about the extent of the problem and to identify solutions. These actions are helping to re-inforce the role of the group in contributing to emerging policy agendas.

Predictably, rural transport remains a particularly lively policy theme. Defra has used supplementary questions within the intelligence gathering process to seek information about local responses where the subsidy for non-commercial bus services had been withdrawn. Department for Transport were aware that community transport groups were often attempting to fill the service gaps left by local authority cutbacks. Defra was able to supplement this information by highlighting the work that local RCAN members were undertaking on the issue, sometimes directly and sometimes in partnership with others. For instance, Cambridgeshire ACRE had worked with its County Council to put together a community transport partnership, and it led on some consultation with rural communities about what solutions would work well and how to deliver them.

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<sup>1</sup> Wheels 2 Work are moped loan schemes to help (usually young) people in rural areas reach employment and training opportunities.

Although this was not used directly to influence national policy, intelligence from local RCAN members was valuable in providing Department for Transport with a more accurate picture of local responses to address identified needs.

### Opportunities, challenges and lessons

Defra RCPU staff value the information provided through pillar 3 reporting on various topics. The process has evolved and it seems that the ability to follow up or interrogate intelligence further through supplementary questions and Reference Groups has been important. The examples above confirm this view. Defra has commented that it has given the process more dynamic and pro-active elements. Follow up often needs to take place rapidly if it is to have value in a fast-moving policy environment.

Defra recognises that it would be unrealistic to expect that all intelligence provided through pillar 3 reporting should lead to an outcome. Inevitably, some is of greater and some of less interest to the policy teams in Defra, depending on its own policy priorities at any one time and its capacity to handle the intelligence.

But, as the bus subsidy example identifies, capturing timely and accurate local information can be valuable at a strategic level without it necessarily leading to a tangible outcome i.e. a policy change.

It is also clear that whilst a uniform response from all 38 local RCAN members can be useful, it is not required to make a difference. Defra is able to use specific local examples, where appropriate, to support and add value to its other evidence.

The expert Reference Groups clearly have a valuable role to play. Enabling policy makers in Defra and elsewhere to have direct contact with local RCAN practitioners seems to be particularly worthwhile. That inter-action enables issues to be properly understood and solutions to be better considered.

Members of Defra's RCPU staff have commented that intelligence reporting seems to have represented good value for money, whilst recognising there is scope to improve the system. For instance, rural proofing work with Department of Health would have benefitted from better joining up with the growing evidence of local RCAN members who were winning Healthwatch contracts<sup>2</sup>.

This case study evidence tends to reinforce the overall findings of the mid-term evaluation that local RCAN member intelligence reporting:

- Gave Defra evidence it sought about the way a national policy change was being locally interpreted or implemented and the rural implications. This enabled Defra to approach the relevant Department/agency more effectively;
- Provided Defra with 'real world' examples of new policy measures being applied in rural areas, highlighting good practice or practical challenges. This helped Defra engage positively with the relevant policy Department/agency;
- Flagged up a policy concern arising in rural areas which Defra had not previously been fully aware of. This prompted Defra to approach the relevant Department/agency in a timely fashion and with relevant evidence.

Packaged in the right way, this grass roots rural intelligence is a resource which can be used widely by Defra. There is also considerable scope for other Departments to benefit from this flow of RCAN intelligence. It can be and has the potential to be a significant contributor to the

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<sup>2</sup> Healthwatch are the local organisations whose role is to give a voice to users of health and social care services.

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rural proofing process, making sure that national policies are fit for purpose and designed in ways that will benefit communities in rural areas.

*This is one of a series of learning notes and case studies which has been produced from the mid-term evaluation of Defra's 2011-15 investment in the RCAN/ACRE network.*

*The learning notes and case studies were commissioned by Defra*

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