

THE STATE OF RURAL PUBLIC SERVICES 2011

A report by the Rural Services Network

November 2011

rsnonline
RURAL SERVICES NETWORK



Rural Services Network

The Rural Services Network (RSN) is a group of over 250 local authorities and service providers working to establish best practice across the spectrum of rural service provision. The network has representation across the range of rural services, including local authorities, public bodies, businesses, charities and voluntary groups.

It is devoted to safeguarding and improving services in rural communities across England. It is the only national network specifically focusing on this vital aspect of rural life.

The network has three main purposes:

- **Representing** the case for a better deal for rural service provision;
- **Exchanging** useful and relevant information;
- **Developing and sharing** best practice.

The Rural Services Network exists to ensure services delivered to the **communities of predominantly rural England** are as strong and as effective as possible.

It has two operating arms: the SPARSE-Rural partnership of local authorities and the Rural Services Partnership (a not-for-profit company).

<http://www.rsonline.org.uk/>

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First Group is pleased to be the sponsor of the State of Rural Public Services 2011 report.

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Brian Wilson Associates

Brian Wilson Associates provides high quality research, evaluation and advice on policy issues such as rural development, service delivery and public service reform, community action, local governance, the voluntary sector, social inclusion and community cohesion.

Brian Wilson managed the research, analysis and writing of the State of Rural Public Services 2011 report, with additional input from Richard Inman and Dan Bates of the RSN.

<http://brianwilsonassociates.co.uk/>

Foreword

I am delighted to introduce this, our second report on trends in rural public service provision. Information drawn from the frontline of our Rural Services Network membership has played a key part in its compilation, providing us with an up-to-date picture as local authorities and other service providers juggle with shrinking budgets. This report shows beyond doubt that there are tangible impacts being felt by rural communities who depend on those services. On the positive side, it also demonstrates that service providers have made great efforts to innovate and retain services. Examples of that rural practice are highlighted within the text.

Inevitably, in a report this size, we have had to focus down on certain service areas. Public transport is one of those and rightly so. It is so often a central feature of rural disadvantage and the well-being of more vulnerable groups, like the elderly. The finding of widespread cuts to rural bus services is worrying indeed.

This year's report also contains substantive (and often new) evidence about services that have generally received less attention. They include libraries, sports and leisure facilities, cultural services, parks and open spaces, street cleaning and litter collection. All of them services which help shape quality of life. In many rural areas this report shows they are subject to significant changes in the way they are being managed and delivered.

It is impossible to overlook the impact of severe reductions in public funding. Especially since: a) it costs more to deliver services in sparse rural areas; and b) central government gives less grant funding to rural than to urban local authorities. Recent work for SPARSE-Rural¹ found that, on average, Predominantly Rural authorities receive £324 per head of population in 2011/12, whilst Predominantly Urban authorities receive £487 per head of population – a difference of £163 (and 50% more). Put another way, rural residents are typically charged an extra £99 in Council Tax (21% more than urban residents), yet they each get £64 less of local services. This is clearly inequitable and needs urgent reform.

There is also much evidence of localism at work in this report. Parish and town councils, volunteers, community trusts, social enterprises and the like are playing a growing part in rural public service delivery. They are certainly helping to sustain some services and in the best examples are helping to improve them too. The experience from introducing more volunteers to help run branch library services will certainly be a trend to watch in coming years.

These are difficult economic times for households everywhere, but there can be no doubt that certain common concerns, such as the rising price of petrol and of fuel to heat homes, will have a bigger impact upon rural households. One must add to this the context of lower average wages for employment in rural areas.

I am sure this report will be of interest to national policy makers and local service providers alike. Its analysis of recent trends should help to focus minds on the challenges and priorities for rural service delivery. Its examples of rural practice and innovation should

¹ LG Futures, 2011

stimulate learning and fresh ideas. With a Defra Ministerial Rural Policy Statement pencilled in for publication early in 2012 it is certainly timely.

Councillor Roger Begy OBE
Chairman, Rural Services Network

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Summary of findings

This year's State of Rural Public Services report has its main focus on three service areas, namely: public transport; cultural services and libraries; and parks, leisure and environmental services. Part B of the report then contains short updates on the evidence for four other service areas which featured in last year's (2010) report, namely: primary schools; affordable housing; facilities for young people; and support services for older people.

Inevitably, reducing public expenditure provides a backdrop to this report, including the 12% decrease in 2011/12 in the main central government grant paid to local authorities. This report examines recent evidence about rural service provision and identifies some early impacts from the funding squeeze. It also highlights various examples of rural practice and innovation in service delivery.

Public transport: evidence shows that those living in rural areas make roughly the same number of journeys as those in urban areas, but they travel longer distances. They are also more likely to make those journeys by car (even where they have low incomes). Access to public transport (or lack of it) can be a key issue for rural communities. Data going back to 2002 shows there has been a sizeable increase in the number of rural households with access to a regular bus service, though (latest) 2008 figures indicate this trend may have peaked. Rural residents still use bus services much less often than urban residents. There has been a big increase in the number of eligible (mainly retired) people in rural areas claiming a concessionary bus pass, although large numbers still fail to do so.

Survey information from Rural Services Network (RSN) members and elsewhere shows widespread cuts in local authority funding for bus services. Responding RSN members had, on average, cut their revenue budget by 19% between 2010/11 and 2011/12. Pressure on services is coming from various angles – reducing local authority subsidy, rising fuel costs, less Government reimbursement for concessionary fares and impending cuts to Bus Service Operator Grant. Typical impacts in 2011/12 include reduced service frequencies, increases in full price fares and (in some places) a reversion to the statutory minimum provision for concessionary fares. Nonetheless, actions are being taken to protect rural services, with some areas looking more to community and demand-responsive provision.

Cultural services and libraries: the evidence shows that those living in rural areas are slightly less likely to visit local libraries, theatres or concert halls than those living elsewhere, and much less likely to visit local museums or galleries. The data also shows a marked downward trend for use of libraries over time. However, rural levels of engagement with and volunteering in the arts are high. Most rural residents express satisfaction with their library service. Their satisfaction with the other cultural services is much less and is lower than for urban residents. This, no doubt, reflects their poor availability for many rural communities.

All the RSN members answering a survey said they had reduced their libraries budget. The average reduction between 2010/11 and 2011/12 is 9%, though in some places it exceeds 20%. A majority of responding RSN members have kept broadly the same budget for spend (directly or as grants) on cultural services, with almost all the remainder making cuts. As for

impacts, with library services it includes service centralisation, fewer mobiles, shorter opening hours, more co-location and greater use of volunteers. A considerable amount of innovation has been identified in library service provision to rural communities. The impacts on cultural services include staffing cuts, transfer of facilities to parish and town councils or trusts and attempts to increase funding from other sources. Many authorities are still reviewing their expenditure on this group of services.

Parks, leisure and environmental services: the evidence shows that rural residents are somewhat less likely to use sports and leisure facilities or parks and open spaces than those living elsewhere. However, there is considerable variation between different rural areas. Rural and urban residents share similar levels of satisfaction with these local services, though the former have slightly above average levels of satisfaction with litter collection in their area. Some environmental concerns are less of an issue in rural areas e.g. graffiti and fly-posting, but detritus and fly-tipping can clearly be an issue on rural roads and land.

Most RSN members responding to a survey had cut expenditure in 2011/12 on maintaining parks and open spaces, and on management of sports and leisure facilities. Most had maintained similar levels of spend on grants to sports and leisure facilities, and on street cleaning or litter collection services. A number of authorities had been able to achieve some savings by squeezing management costs or re-tendering contracts. Nonetheless, rural impacts were widely cited, including services less frequently delivered, services delivered to a lower specification and staffing cuts. Greater involvement of parish and town councils received a frequent mention, which could mean devolving services to them, transferring assets to them or encouraging them to top-up principal authority services.

The updates on four service areas from last year's (2010) report find that:

- *Primary schools:* in 2010 there were 5,198 primary schools located in rural areas, which is 31% of the English total. These rural schools have above average vacancy rates i.e. unfilled pupil places. Rural schools achieve relatively good exam results at Key Stage 2 (age 11), which research explains by below average poverty levels;
- *Affordable housing:* in 2010 an average rural house was £42,000 dearer than its urban equivalent. Despite some house price falls since 2007 and low mortgage interest rates, it remains very hard to become a first time buyer because of the size of the deposit that lenders now expect. Levels of social housing completions remained fairly high in 2010, though many are from grants agreed some years ago;
- *Facilities for young people:* this age group is under-represented in rural areas, yet the wider rural population sees improving activities for teenagers as a high policy priority. Services can be hard to access, with a recent study finding almost 5% of rural 16 to 18 year olds more than one hours travel distance from a further education college;
- *Support services for older people:* this age group is over-represented in rural areas, with those of state retirement age forming almost a quarter of the rural population. However, new data shows that only 16% of sheltered housing is located in rural areas. Other analysis finds very low claimant levels for Pension Credit among low income pensioners in smaller rural settlements.

Various examples of interesting rural practice or innovation in service delivery are included in the main body of the report, all of which have been drawn from RSN local authorities.

Introduction

This is the second report to be produced by the Rural Services Network about the state of rural public services. It follows on from our 2010 report². Recent and readily available data has been brought together in order to consider the position and trends with respect to public service provision to England's rural communities.

Part A of the report puts the spotlight on three service areas which members of the Network have told us are particularly at risk of cuts as budgets in the public sector become significantly squeezed. These are: i) public transport; ii) cultural services and libraries; and iii) parks, leisure and environmental services.

Part B of the report then provides shorter updates on the situation with four other service areas, which were a focus in the last (2010) report. These are: i) primary schools; ii) affordable rural housing; iii) services for older people; and iv) facilities for young people.

Where possible this report makes use of existing rural analyses and full credit is given in references to the organisations who originated such work. The State of the Countryside 2010 report by the Commission for Rural Communities was a particularly useful source. In other cases existing datasets have been re-analysed for this report, to produce statistics for rural areas. A third source of data has been a survey of relevant Rural Services Network members carried out during June/July 2011 about the three areas covered in part A of the report. This provided an up-to-date snapshot of issues. Finally, the report includes a few examples of rural service delivery practice to illustrate its findings and these have likewise been gathered from Rural Services Network members.

The focus here is on *public services*, though these are not always delivered by public bodies. They may be outsourced to, or commissioned from, private and voluntary or community sector organisations. An obvious example would be local authority tendering of bus services. That said, the dividing line between public, private and other services is becoming ever more blurred.

Where data is available at a very local level (wards, postcodes or Census output areas) it is generally matched to the official definition of rural and urban areas, supported by the Office for National Statistics. This broadly defines settlements with fewer than 10,000 residents as rural – a definition which can be further disaggregated into rural towns, villages and dispersed settlements i.e. hamlets or isolated dwellings. According to this definition just under a fifth of the population of England (19% or 9.8 million people) lives in a rural area.

Where data is only available at a local authority level the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) classification is used. Predominantly rural district or unitary authorities are those where more than half the population lives in a rural area. They, in turn, can be sub-divided into those where more than 80% live in a rural area (known as R80) and

² Rural Services Network, 2010 (1)

those where between 50% and 80% do so (known as R50). In just a few cases other proxy definitions for rural have had to be used in this report.

Most of the research and all of the report drafting was carried out by Brian Wilson. Richard Inman assisted by running the surveys of Rural Services Network members. Dan Bates provided advice and some spreadsheets he had compiled earlier from data on cultural and environmental services. Graham Biggs, Chief Executive of the Rural Services Network, then oversaw the whole project.

Particular thanks must go to the members of the Rural Services Network who responded in a timely fashion to the surveys and who contributed useful examples of innovation in rural delivery. Sincere thanks must also go to First Group plc for their sponsorship of this report.

PART A – REVIEW OF MAIN TOPICS

This part of the report looks at three important areas of public services delivery in turn, starting with public transport.

Public transport

Transport matters are of huge importance to rural communities, since it allows them to access employment, services and other opportunities. A 2009 survey of residents in rural areas³ found that public transport was the top priority for improving their quality of life. It was also given the highest rating for something which would improve the quality of life for future generations. These findings held broadly true for residents in all sizes of rural settlement and regardless of the region in which they lived. If further evidence were needed, a more recent report⁴ found rural respondents placing “poor access to public transport” at the top of their list of disadvantages from living in a rural community.

Travel patterns

The National Travel Survey⁵ shows that over the period of a year:

- Residents in rural areas make roughly the same number of journeys as those in urban areas;
- They spend a little more time travelling, though that difference is slight; but
- There is a big difference in distance travelled. Rural residents make longer journeys and so travel many more miles than their urban counterparts. Those in villages and dispersed settlements travel 10,000 miles per year on average, which is 42% more than the England average. Those living in the most sparsely populated areas travel further still (56% above the average)⁶.

Car ownership

Unsurprisingly, households in rural areas are more likely than those in urban areas to have cars available to them and this is especially true in the smallest settlements⁷. In villages and dispersed settlements 94% of households on middling incomes own a car, while 55% of them own more than one car. Even among the poorest fifth of households, car ownership in rural areas is at 75% (compared with 46% in urban areas), so car ownership cannot be taken as a proxy for wealth. Where this reflects a lack of alternative travel means it might rather be considered a significant extra cost burden for poorer households. It is relevant,

³ Ipsos MORI, 2010

⁴ Rose Regeneration and Ruralcity Media, 2011

⁵ Department for Transport, 2010

⁶ Commission for Rural Communities, 2010 (3)

⁷ Commission for Rural Communities, 2010 (1)

too, that average annual wages in 2010 were more than £4,000 lower for jobs in rural than in urban areas⁸.

Share of households in the poorest fifth and middle fifth of incomes with a car, 2008

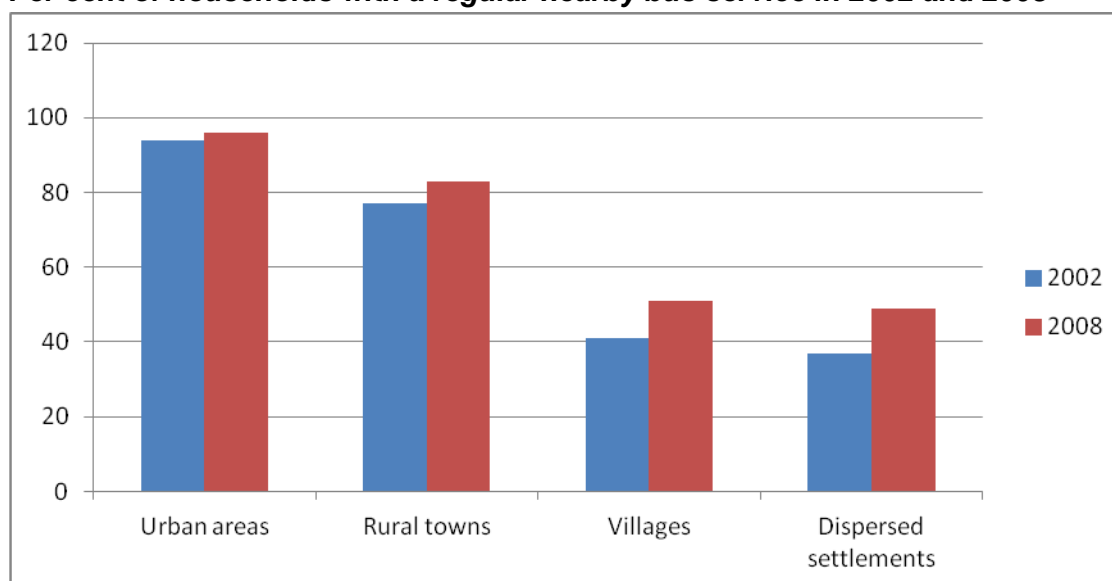
	Villages and dispersed settlements		Rural towns		Urban areas	
	Lowest incomes	Middle incomes	Lowest incomes	Middle incomes	Lowest incomes	Middle incomes
No car	25%	6%	42%	10%	54%	18%
One car	51%	40%	44%	47%	38%	52%
Two + cars	24%	54%	14%	43%	8%	30%

Data from the DVLA shows that some rural areas have a high proportion of older cars e.g. in East Anglia, the South West and the Marches. This may be indicative of poorer households owning cars, though it is not at all clear why these southern rural places have more old cars than rural places further north. Other factors, such as demographics, may play a part.

Access to public transport

According to the National Travel Survey, by 2008 half of households in villages and dispersed settlements were within a short (13 minute) walk of a regular (hourly or better) bus service. Some 96% of urban households met these criteria.

Per cent of households with a regular nearby bus service in 2002 and 2008



The remaining half of rural households had only an infrequent or a more distant service. Nevertheless, this represents a considerable improvement in rural access to regular bus services; as recently as 2002 little more than a third of households in villages and dispersed settlements met these criteria.

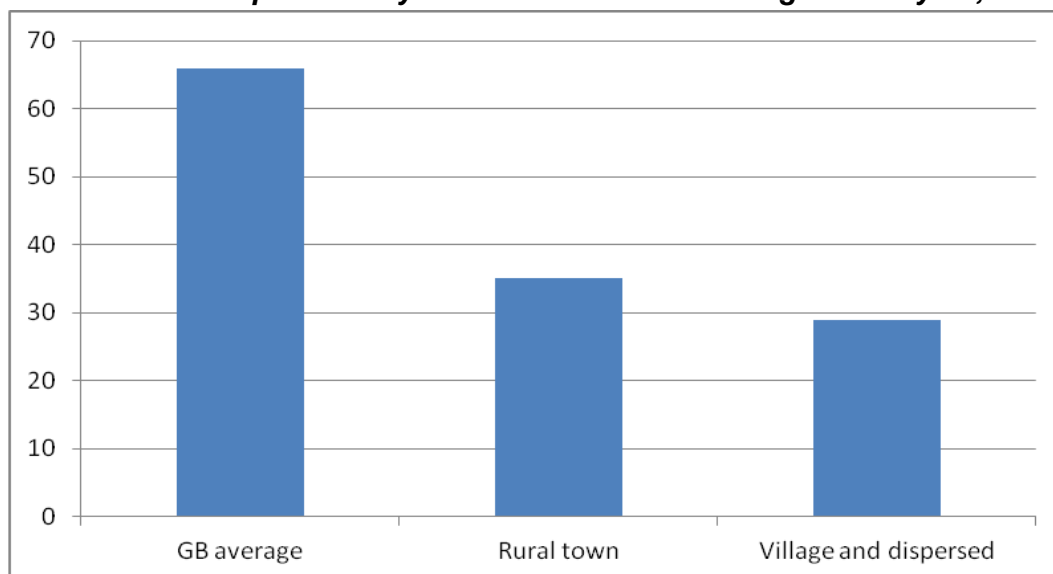
⁸ Defra and Government Statistical Service, 2011

Interestingly, latest figures⁹ indicate a slight deterioration since 2008, with 47% meeting these criteria by 2009 (a year that is before the cuts in public expenditure). Another year's data would be required to check that this is not just a statistical blip.

Bus service usage

The National Travel Survey¹⁰, which covers Great Britain, asks how often people have used a bus during the previous year (the so-called 'trip rate'). Figures mirror those above for access to regular nearby bus services; they show that people who live in rural communities make roughly half the national average number of bus trips. Those living in villages and dispersed settlements made 29 bus trips over the course of a year.

Number of bus trips made by individual residents during the last year, 2008/09



The 2008 Place Survey¹¹ similarly asked people whether they had used a local bus service during the last six months. It confirmed that usage is lower overall in rural areas, though it also identified considerable local variation. Predominantly rural areas with relatively high levels of bus use included Northumberland, Durham, west Oxfordshire, the Isle of Wight, south and north Devon and eastern Suffolk.

The take-up of concessionary fares schemes¹², giving free travel to those aged 60 and over and to the disabled, also shows a marked rural-urban differentiation. As the table below illustrates, take-up has increased in all types of area, but most strikingly in the smallest settlements. This upward trend is almost certainly linked with the extension of the scheme, to offer free travel throughout England rather than just in the local area.

⁹ Defra and Government Statistical Service, 2011

¹⁰ Department for Transport, 2009

¹¹ Department for Communities & Local Government, 2009

¹² Commission for Rural Communities, 2010

Per cent of those aged 60 and over who have taken-up concessionary fare passes

	2002	2008	Change 2002-08
Urban areas	56%	77%	+19%
Rural towns	45%	63%	+18%
Villages	26%	52%	+26%
Dispersed settlements	20%	49%	+29%

Local public spend on transport

A new survey has been conducted among Rural Services Network members, covering the three main policy topics in this report. It gathered transport information from predominantly rural county and unitary authorities, and from some bus operators in rural areas.

Rural practice and innovation – East Riding of Yorkshire

For the last few years East Riding of Yorkshire Council has used a grading system to work out appropriate subsidy levels for its contracted bus routes. This system explicitly aims to protect rural services that would otherwise not survive.

The council says there is “no exact science behind it”, but it grades routes according to two criteria. First, whether they serve predominantly rural or urban areas, with rural given a higher score. Then, second, whether they mainly provide access to: employment and schools; shopping centres (generally off-peak); or for leisure (generally evenings and Sundays). The very highest score would thus be awarded to a rural route providing access to employment or schools. These scores, which range from one to three, are applied to calculate the subsidy per passenger which the council offers for contracted bus routes.

Service 747, which runs three times a day from the market town of Pocklington into the city of York, provides both a peak time service and off-peak access to shops and other facilities for residents in villages such as Fangfoss and Full Sutton. It is therefore sustained by a fairly significant subsidy from the council.

All but one of the nine responding local authorities said that their transport revenue budget had been reduced between 2010/11 and 2011/12. The average year-on-year budget change they reported was a reduction of just over 19%, though in one case the budget had essentially been halved¹³. One authority had withdrawn all of its subsidy for Sunday services. Another was targeting the least used routes for cuts (‘thinning out’). A third one had renegotiated some commercial contracts with operators, but felt this may not be a sustainable policy in the long-term.

This is broadly in line with the findings of a recent Parliamentary Transport Committee report¹⁴, which found that nationally 70% of local authorities had already cut funding for supported bus services following budget pressures that resulted from the Government’s Spending Review. Their report goes on to say that bus services in rural areas are among the worst affected.

¹³ Responding authorities were asked to compare budgets for the two financial years on a like-for-like basis, in particular to remove any changes that simply resulted from new concessionary fare scheme responsibilities.

¹⁴ House of Commons Transport Committee, 2011

One of the bus operators in the RSN survey concurs, noting that the hardest hit places are those which are most rural and which have the highest proportion of retired residents – a description fitting many coastal areas. Another said that the combination of rising fuel costs, diminishing reimbursement for concessionary fares and impending cuts to Bus Service Operator Grant may result in them serving notice on some of their contracts.

Local authorities and bus operators were asked about the impacts of these 2011/12 spending changes for rural communities. The impacts can be categorised as:

- *Frequency*: 9 of the 11 who responded said that (some) services are now less frequent in rural areas. In 2 cases this marked a move to a demand-responsive transport approach;
- *Full price fares*: these are rising in all 10 areas that replied. Half said the increases matched inflation and half said the increases were above inflation. Five respondents cited rising fuel prices as a key issue here. Whilst one local authority is managing to keep down price rises on 'sponsored' routes, another expects prices on 'supported' routes to be brought in line with levels charged on fully commercial routes;
- *Concessionary fares*: 4 of the 11 responses cited concessionary fare schemes reverting to the statutory minimum, being available only after 9.30am on a weekday. Two areas, though, have found that this results in half empty buses before 9.30am and overfull buses just after, so it is not generating much of a saving. The other 7 responses were from areas which had not altered scheme eligibility. The RSN has been pressing for the statutory concessionary fares schemes (and its funding) to be extended to cover community transport operations;
- *Routes*: there were also a few who cited bus routes being chopped altogether. One unusual case is a route threatened with closure, where many regular concessionary fare users have agreed to make a voluntary payment and so the operator has continued running the service for a short trial period. The Department for Transport has, however, indicated that this might still be seen as coercion and so be unlawful.

Rural practice and innovation – rail in the south west

First Great Western has seen a rapid rise in passenger numbers travelling on the rural branch lines it operates in the south west. In the case of the 4¼ mile St Erth to St Ives line, that growth – to half a million passenger journeys per year – is largely driven by tourism. Anxious to reduce road congestion in St Ives, Cornwall Council is funding a 700 space car park at St Erth station, whilst First Great Western will put on longer trains to cope with the Summer season.

However, the fastest growth of all is on the 'Maritime Line' from Truro to Falmouth, where local users and commuters (rather than tourists) predominate. Journey numbers rose by a staggering 91% from 2007 to 2011. Part of this has come from the University of Exeter's new Cornwall Campus, overlooking the Fal Estuary at Penryn. Cornwall Council funded a new passing loop on the single track line at Penryn, allowing train frequency to be doubled to once every half an hour.

Two of the keys to growth, according to First Great Western, have been close working with local authorities and building a strategy for each branch line around a clear understanding of its core market. The 39 mile Exeter to Barnstable line provides the only commercial rail link into north Devon. An issue identified here was middle-of-the-day gaps in the timetable. Revenue support from the County Council has enabled this to be filled with two additional

services, giving a regular hourly service for the first time.

Another tactic has been the introduction of some substantial fare reductions. The aim is to encourage some completely new users to the line into Exeter, especially given the rise in petrol prices for drivers. To facilitate this Devon councils are to buy or lease land for car parking at a number of rural stations so they can act as railheads for surrounding villages.

The Community Rail Partnership in the south west is one of the most established and it is credited with gaining a great deal of publicity for these branch lines. It and the forums for individual branch lines are also behind the work of community volunteers, who have helped to restore many of the stations to their original condition and given them a local feel.

The outcome is that the 'Community Rail' branch lines serving rural communities in Devon and Cornwall now have the best level of train service in their entire history.

Policy responses cited to protect services in rural areas included the introduction of more community transport and more demand-responsive provision, a taxi link to the main bus route, support for voluntary car schemes, maintaining services which run into market towns or to essential services, working up tailored solutions with parish and town councils, a group of parish councils paying for the re-instatement of a withdrawn bus service, the training of volunteer bus drivers to operate lightly-used routes and targeting subsidy to reduce the price of bus passes for post-16 students. Many of these responses flagged the importance of transport integration, such as linking demand-responsive services with commercial bus routes and rail stations.

Concluding comments

Rural communities rely heavily on private transport, yet the statistical evidence shows there have been real improvements in public transport provision over the previous period. More rural communities now have access to a regular bus service and more residents who are eligible (often the most vulnerable) have taken up a concessionary fare pass.

However, public spending cuts are changing that landscape with public transport clearly affected in most rural areas. In 2011/12 revenue funding for transport authorities was sharply reduced and the way concessionary fares are reimbursed was altered leaving many shire authorities with a budget shortfall¹⁵. In 2012/13 Bus Service Operator Grant will shrink by 20%. Operators are also facing high fuel prices. Some of the service impacts cited in this report may be evident in urban areas, too, though it appears the financially marginal nature of much rural service provision makes it that much more vulnerable.

There is certainly evidence of innovation to help maintain rural services and continuing efforts to improve the integration of services plays a part in that. In particular, where demand responsive transport (which can be cost effective) is integrated with traditional bus or rail services. The Government's £10 million to rural authorities to encourage the growth of community transport is likely to achieve more if it can build on that principle.

¹⁵ Rural Services Network, 2011

Cultural services and libraries

This heading covers a varied group of services, some of which – like libraries – are directly delivered by local authorities and others – like local theatres and museums – which may receive grant aid or other support from their local authority. Work in early 2011 for the Rural Services Network¹⁶ found that public funding for them was likely to reduce in many areas.

These are not services which usually receive much attention in rural policy debate and the evidence base about them could be described as slim. To help plug that gap data from the 2008 Place Survey has been re-analysed, generating some fresh rural statistics.

Use of services

The Taking Part survey¹⁷ asks people whether they visited certain facilities or engaged with culture in particular ways during the previous year. Latest figures for 2010 showed that, compared with those living in urban areas, rural residents were less likely to visit a library but more likely to visit a heritage site. Rural people were also more likely to engage with the arts and much more likely to volunteer for the arts and sports.

Per cent of residents who had done the following during the previous year (2010)

	Visited a public library	Visited a museum or gallery	Visited a heritage site	Engaged with the arts	Participated digitally with culture	Volunteered in the arts or sport
Rural areas	36%	47%	78%	79%	36%	31%
Urban areas	40%	47%	68%	74%	35%	22%

A qualification is that data from Taking Part refers to visiting or taking part in culture at any location e.g. rural residents may visit museums in urban centres. Arguably more relevant to this report is the use of local cultural facilities.

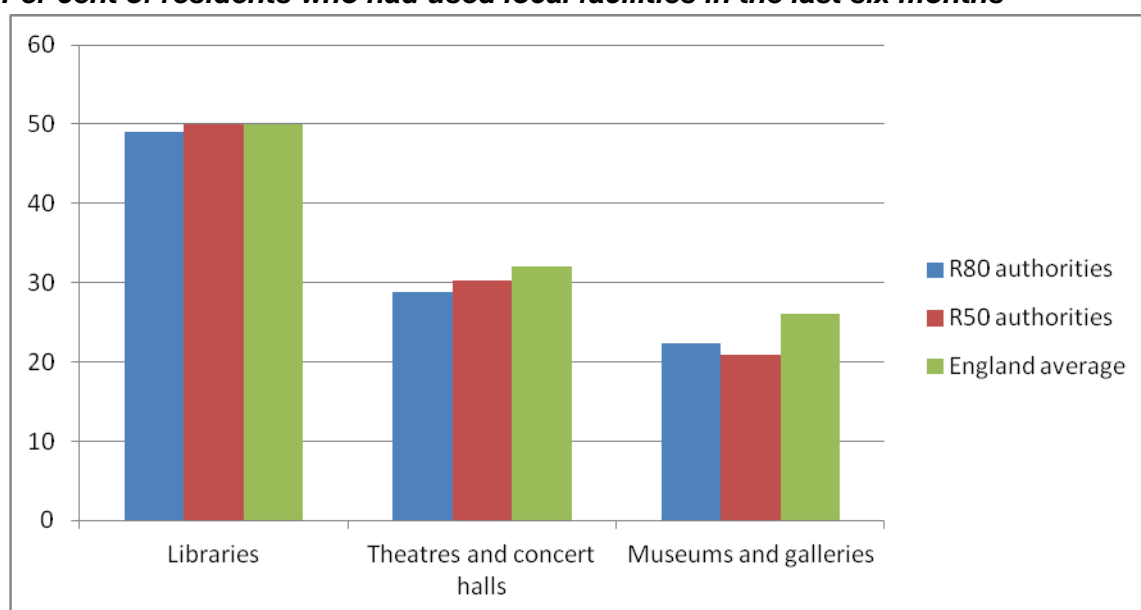
The 2008 Place Survey asked people across England whether they had used certain local services during the previous six months. Again, the question relies on accuracy of recall and results do not always tally with those from the Taking Part survey, but there's no reason to think that replies from rural residents are any more or less accurate than those from urban residents. Inconsistencies between the two surveys may be due to subtle differences in the wording of questions asked.

Our analysis of the Place Survey shows that rural residents' use of local libraries, theatres, concert halls, museums and galleries is less than the (England) average. That difference is small in the case of libraries, but is more notable in the case of museums and galleries.

¹⁶ Brian Wilson Associates, 2011

¹⁷ Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2011

Per cent of residents who had used local facilities in the last six months



The Taking Part survey also provides some useful trend information. It finds that:

- The proportion of rural people visiting a public library declined from 47% in 2005/06 to 36% by 2010;
- The proportion of rural people visiting a museum or gallery rose from 43% in 2005/06 to 47% by 2010; and
- The proportion of rural people visiting a heritage site was broadly unchanged between 2005/06 (77%) and 2010 (78%).

Satisfaction with services

The Place Survey also asked people how satisfied they were with a range of local services. Rural residents were just as likely to be very or fairly satisfied with their libraries as those living elsewhere in England. However, fewer rural residents were very or fairly satisfied with their museums, galleries, theatres and concert halls than the England average.

Per cent of residents who are very or fairly satisfied with local services (2008)

	R80 authorities	R50 authorities	R80 + R50	England
Libraries	70%	68%	69%	69%
Museums and galleries	37%	38%	37%	42%
Theatres and concert halls	39%	35%	37%	43%

These figures for satisfaction levels, however, mask considerable variation within the R50 and R80 groups of local authorities. For example, satisfaction with libraries ranged from 54% up to 80% in individual authorities, whilst that for museums and galleries ranged from just 14% up to 55%. Local circumstances are at least as important as rurality.

Despite the general picture of rural residents having relatively low satisfaction levels, the Place Survey shows them to be less likely than the England average to say that cultural facilities are one of the local services that is most in need of improvement. This may well, of course, simply indicate that they have other higher priorities for improvement.

Public spend on services

There is considerable evidence that local authority budget savings are impacting on cultural services and libraries. Indeed, in a 2011 survey of Rural Services Network members¹⁸ cultural services came out top of a list of services most likely to be affected by cuts. Libraries were seen as a county function with cuts frequently being planned and another survey¹⁹ noted their potential for being handed over to parish and town councils, development trusts or local community groups.

Work nationally by the Local Government Association²⁰ has shown that more than four-fifths of relevant local authorities (83%) planned to make savings on their library services. This frequently involved reducing opening hours, transferring services into community or mutual ownership and moving libraries into shared premises.

A number of examples were cited in a piece on RSN Online²¹. More recent information about those examples indicates that: North Yorkshire will stop operating 10 of its 11 mobile libraries and may close 8 branches unless agreement can be reached for them to be run by volunteers; Gloucestershire now believes most of its library network will remain open, by turning some into 'express libraries' and having 20 branches run by local communities; and Buckinghamshire will concentrate library services onto fewer sites, closing down 14 mainly rural branches unless enough volunteers now come forward to run them.

The latest survey among members of the Rural Services Network, undertaken for this report, finds that almost all of the responding upper tier authorities have reduced their library budgets between 2010/11 and 2011/12. On average their budgets have changed by minus 9%, though two authorities made year-on-year reductions which exceeded 20% (in one case to front load a 25% reduction to be achieved over four years).

Spend in 2011/12 compared with 2010/11 (number of responding councils)

	Libraries	Museums and galleries	Theatres and concert halls
Spending more	0	1	2
Spending the same	1	19	21
Spending less	7	8	8

¹⁸ Brian Wilson Associates, 2011

¹⁹ Brian Wilson Associates, 2010

²⁰ Local Government Association Analysis & Research, 2011

²¹ Rural Services Network, 2010 (2)

This survey also finds that between 2010/11 and 2011/12 the majority of responding lower tier authorities retained the same budget for spend on local museums, galleries, theatres and concert halls, though most of the remainder did cut their budget for these services.

The finding for museums, galleries, theatres and concert halls could be said to exaggerate the extent of budget retention, since it includes a few authorities who had and still have a zero budget for such services. However, this does not alter the overall conclusion.

Policy responses

The local authorities were asked what difference they thought residents in their rural communities would see from these funding changes. The answers relating to libraries can be categorised as follows:

- *Centralisation*: one said reference services will now only be available from the main county library;
- *Outreach*: mobile libraries are reducing from 8 to 5 in one county and mobile provision is under review in another, with less frequent visits proposed;
- *Community involvement*: examples include using volunteers to run the smallest branches, recruiting more volunteers to the home library service and moves towards a community-run service;
- *Opening hours*: one authority had reduced opening hours at most branches and another had reduced the operating hours of mobiles. Two more were reviewing opening hours. However, one was using volunteers to extend opening times;
- *Co-location*: library branches are being amalgamated with council one-stop shops in one responding county;
- *Technology*: another had invested in new self-service technology for all of its static libraries.

Rural practice and innovation – Wiltshire

Wiltshire Council was already planning to review how it should deliver its library services in future. However, faced with a 28% cut in government funding over three years this task gained a new and urgent objective. The outcome is, perhaps, rather surprising. All 31 of its static library branches and all 5 of its mobiles will remain, and the level of service will be much as before.

This has been achieved by recruiting and training more than 300 community volunteers. From September 2011 volunteers will staff the ten smallest branch libraries in the county. Volunteer co-ordinators, some of whom are provided by the parish and town councils, will ensure that rotas are arranged.

The roles of the volunteers will be to assist customers with the newly installed self-service check-outs, to place returned books back on the shelves and to help people log on to the library computers. A council library assistant will spend some time at each branch twice a week to offer support and undertake tasks that are less suited to volunteers. Where needed, the council's library management team will be there as a further resource. The council will also continue to provide the stock and maintain the buildings.

In addition, there are five other fairly small branch libraries, such as that at Cricklade in the north of the county, where volunteers will be playing a part. In these cases core opening

hours will continue to be operated by council librarians, but the volunteers will be used to enable a longer opening period.

All in all, the council sees this as a very positive outcome and says it has been tremendously impressed by the response of its rural communities. Originally it thought the ten smallest libraries might only be open for three hours per week, but the number of volunteers means that nine of them will retain their previous opening hours. One of these is the library at Durrington, in the Avon valley north of Salisbury, where the Post Point (offering basic post office services) is moving into the same building and where it too will be run by volunteers.

Only one of these eight authorities said that no changes had been made to library services so far, whilst most said that reviews of provision were still ongoing. In one case plans to consult rural communities were noted, while another has established a cross-party working group of councillors to consider rural provision and a third had begun a four year transformation programme for its libraries.

On a positive note, library services appear to be fairly rich seam when it comes to rural innovation. Rural Services Network members are variously:

Locating a library within a building run by a social enterprise, helping its viability and giving additional staff cover for the library.	Locating three community libraries within village schools to improve provision in rural areas (see below).	Piloting a community book point in a resource centre, where users can collect books they ordered online at home or at the centre.
Placing a video-kiosk in a community library, so users can speak directly with a council librarian. The kiosk is used for other services.	Introducing higher quality mobiles, which stay at sites longer and are fitted out like static libraries, with online / video-conferencing facilities.	Using rural libraries to make available information about mental health, building on their reputation as trusted places to access information.
Working with voluntary groups, to use libraries as places to deliver training in IT skills for rural communities.	Placing libraries in community hubs, which offer enquiry points for council services, adult education and community meeting rooms.	Training volunteers to work in libraries. The council still covers building, IT and stock costs, and some professional librarian support (see above).

Rural practice and innovation – Cornwall

Cornwall Council has managed to extend the reach of its library services by opening three branches within village schools. School libraries at St Keverne, St Dennis and Upton Cross have become dual-use, open to the wider community and with a professional librarian present for two hours on three days each week. Any issues regarding safeguarding children are addressed by having a librarian present and a separate entrance for the public.

Upton Cross was the first of the three to open, inspired by a head teacher who was anxious to see local services improve in the Minions Moor area. It replaced the village's infrequent visit from a mobile library.

Benefits of this approach include having a more permanent library service, staffing by someone who lives locally and knows the community and providing residents without their own computer access to the internet at the library. Almost 10,000 public visits were made to these three village libraries during the last year. WRVS volunteers also offer a home delivery service for those who are housebound.

The council will soon embark on a review of its library service provision to rural communities and the merging of libraries with other services is likely to be considered as an option for other areas.

Looking now at museums, galleries, theatres and concert halls, the survey answers about the difference that rural communities would see can be categorised as follows:

- *Management*: examples include an arts centre now being run in partnership with a school, a theatre transferred to a town council with an endowment and museums that are likely to be transferred to town councils;
- *Staffing*: examples were given of both museums and theatres that were experiencing a cut in their staffing levels;
- *Programming*: some areas are attempting to increase footfall and so reduce the need for grants in future. In one case this involves capital investment, in another altering the theatre programme to attract a wider audience and in another developing a three year programme to generate more theatre income;
- *Operations*: examples here include reducing museum opening hours, making better use of theatre buildings, closing one museum to sustain funding for the others and curtailing funding for a district arts initiative;
- *Marketing*: also mentioned was switching to online marketing and dropping more expensive paper based methods.

Again, a few of the responding authorities said that they were conducting reviews or options appraisals, so there could well be implications in their area at a later date.

Rural practice and innovation – North Kesteven

Even in these difficult economic times North Kesteven District Council, in Lincolnshire, recognises the value of arts activities to its communities. With just two larger urban areas it also strives to ensure that these activities reach its 100 flourishing rural communities.

At the heart of this is an award winning partnership with Leisure Connection (an independent provident society) which operates environmental, leisure and arts services on behalf of the Council, including an eight strong development team for visual and performing arts known as ArtsNK.

In the north of the district the village history society at Branston has been supported by ArtsNK, who helped them access grant money. The result has included: local people and school children working with a professional artist to produce a quite extraordinary mosaic timeline of the village's history; a local wood carving group being established and producing three seats for the village; and the excavation of a historic sheep dip that was buried under the village car park.

Running through Branston – from Lincoln to Sleaford – is a 26 mile Spires & Steeples Arts and Heritage Trail, developed to bring to life the heritage and history of this very rural area. Those following the route will pass examples of public art, many a result of village communities working with ArtsNK. Indeed, the Council considers they have “one of the most prolific portfolios of public art in the country”. During 2011 a wide variety of cultural events have taken place along the route to celebrate the Cultural Olympiad and local heritage.

The District Council feels that all this activity brings real benefit to local people. This can be seen in the sense of pride and belonging, and the cohesion to be found among its rural communities. Plus there are the tourism benefits which are being realised, with some impressive growth to show for it in visitor numbers.

Concluding comments

Analysis for this report has identified that rural communities make less use of local cultural services and libraries than their urban counterparts. However, it is unlikely that they value them less and almost certainly reflects the (sometimes poor) availability of such facilities locally. That may similarly explain why rural residents have relatively low satisfaction levels for some of these services.

Feedback from Rural Services Network members and other information sources confirms that these services are typically being squeezed by the current public sector funding constraints. Museums, galleries, theatres and concert halls, where local authority grants or support are likely to be just one source of income, may be somewhat more sheltered by that fact. However, library services appear to be widely impacted in rural areas.

At the same time, it is hard not to be impressed by the degree of innovation that is being shown in library provision and which is certainly helping to retain many branches or mobiles in rural areas. Sharing premises with other local services and involving communities in their running are two obvious trends (which were identified, too, in a recent national report about the Future Libraries Programme pilots²²). Many of these innovative changes are being implemented now and there would appear to be value in tracking their success or otherwise, so that rural lessons can be adequately captured and shared.

²² Local Government Group and Museums, Libraries & Archives, 2011

Parks, leisure and environmental services

The (mainly discretionary) services covered in this section of the report are those for maintaining parks and open spaces, clearing litter from streets and public space, and supporting sports or leisure facilities. Once again, they are services which receive relatively little attention in rural policy debate, though they contribute significantly to communities' quality of life. The appearance of a place is something which is immediately apparent to those who live or work there or who visit it. A recent Rural Services Network survey found that this group of services were at high risk of cuts as a result of the tightening public sector finances.

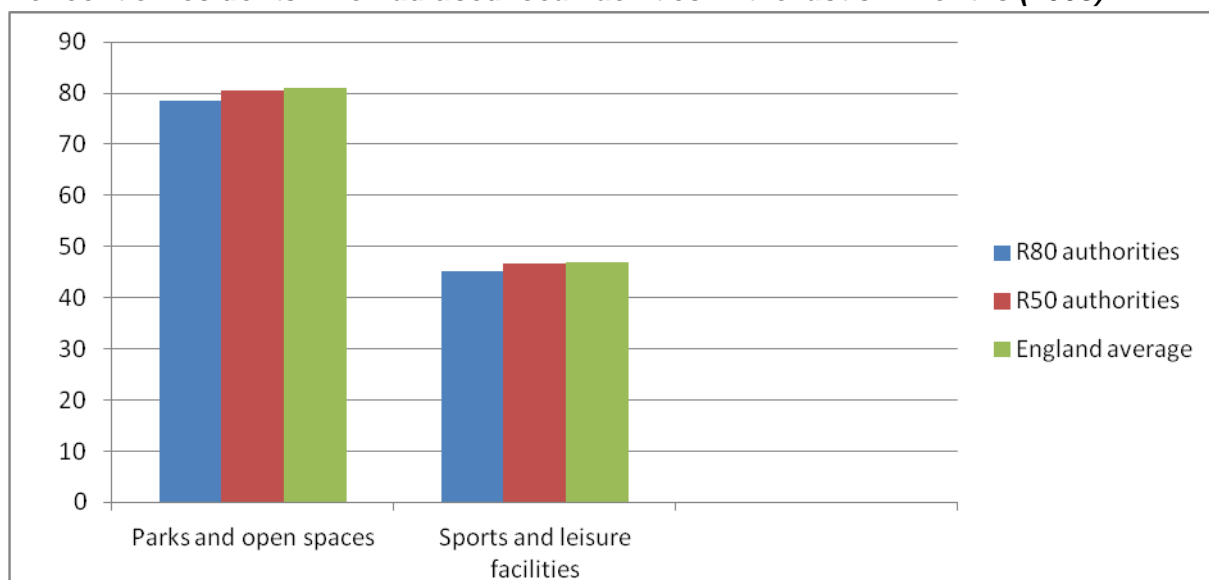
Re-analysis of Place Survey data for this report has generated some new rural statistics, the findings from which are incorporated in the evidence outlined below.

Use of services

The 2008 Place Survey asked people across England whether they had used certain local services during the previous six months. One caution is that survey respondents may find it hard to distinguish between publicly and privately managed sports and leisure facilities, though this applies to urban as well as to rural areas.

Our analysis shows that rural residents' use of both sports and leisure facilities and of parks and open spaces was somewhat below the (England) average.

Per cent of residents who had used local facilities in the last six months (2008)



There is, however, considerable variation between individual rural (R80 and R50) local authority areas, namely:

- The proportion of residents who had in the last six months used parks and open spaces ranged from 88% to 66%; whilst

- The proportion of residents who had in the last six months used sports and leisure facilities ranged from 58% to 32%.

Satisfaction with services

Asked in a different survey²³ about the main things which would improve their quality of life, rural residents placed ‘activities for teenagers’ third on their list – a category which can be taken to include sports and leisure facilities amongst other things. However, only 4% of rural residents said that improving the cleanliness of streets was a priority for them (compared with 12% of urban residents). Similar results came back from a question about things that would improve quality of life for future generations.

The 2008 Place Survey is useful again, here, since it contained a question about satisfaction with local services. It is worth noting that rural people’s satisfaction is much lower for sports and leisure facilities than it is for the other services covered in this chapter.

Our analysis shows that more rural residents were very or fairly satisfied with the collection of litter from open land than their urban counterparts. By contrast, satisfaction levels with parks and open spaces and with sports and leisure facilities were broadly the same for rural and urban residents.

Per cent of residents who are very or fairly satisfied with local services

	R80 authorities	R50 authorities	R80 + R50	England
Litter on open land	62%	60%	61%	57%
Parks and open spaces	67%	68%	68%	69%
Sports and leisure facilities	44%	47%	45%	46%

Some further evidence can be found in the Local Environmental Quality survey²⁴ which collects data from sampled locations across England about the extent of litter, detritus, graffiti and fly-posting. Figures for 2008 include findings for ‘rural roads’, amongst other types of location. They show that, while rural roads experienced little relatively graffiti or fly-posting, they were subject to relatively high levels of litter and (particularly) detritus. Litter was most obviously an issue on road verges and adjoining landscaped areas. The rural prevalence of detritus, whilst not wishing to play it down as an issue, may be less surprising since it included grit, mud and fallen vegetation on roads.

Proportion of sampled sites where these were widespread or worse

	Litter	Detritus	Graffiti	Fly-posting
Rural roads	12%	50%	1%	0%
All locations	9%	25%	6%	1%

This survey also provides an overall score for environmental quality out of 100 where high scores are good, indicating minimal litter, detritus and so on. In 2009/10 rural roads were

²³ Ipsos MORI, 2010

²⁴ Keep Britain Tidy, 2010

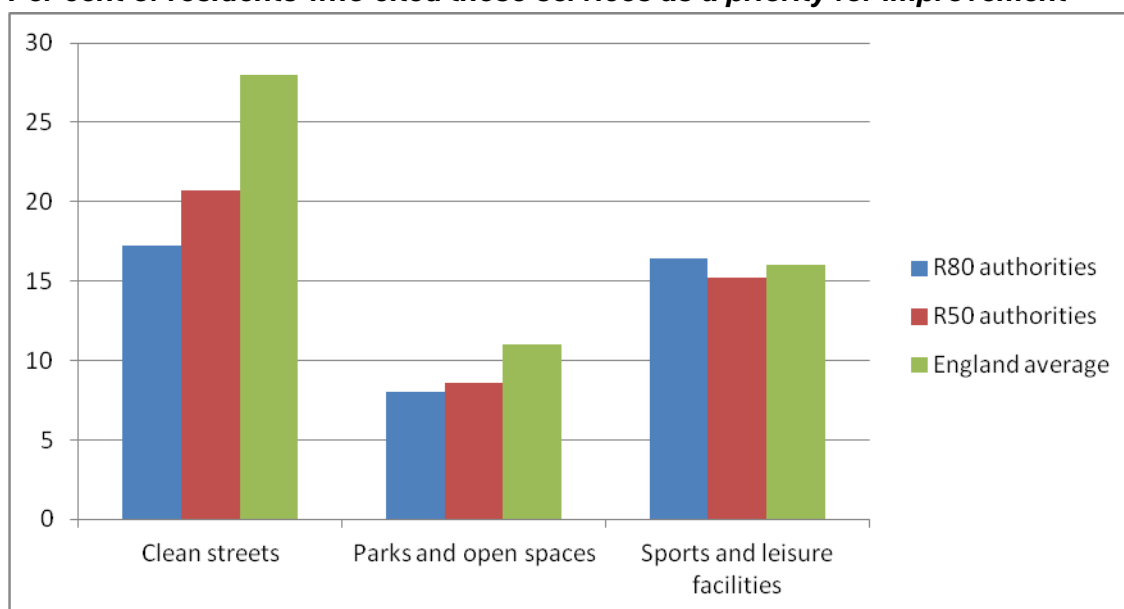
scored at 75, which was a moderate score though it marked a deterioration since 2008/09 (score 78).

Public priority given to these services

Given this picture it is helpful to consider Place Survey results for the proportion of residents who think that these services should be a priority for improvement. For rural residents none of this group of services could be said to be a high priority, though having cleaner streets and better sports and leisure facilities are medium priority issues.

Those living in rural areas are considerably less likely than their urban counterparts to view street cleaning as a priority for improvement. They are also less likely to think that improving parks and open spaces should be a priority. Yet they are every bit as likely to prioritise improvements to sports and leisure facilities; it may well be that poor rural access to such facilities lies behind this finding.

Per cent of residents who cited these services as a priority for improvement



Public expenditure on services

The new survey conducted among members of the Rural Services Network shows that most responding district councils have cut spending in 2011/12 on parks and open space maintenance and on managing sports and leisure facilities. However, a majority have sustained their level of spending on grants to other bodies who manage local sports and leisure facilities and for litter collection and street cleaning. To some extent this could be said to reflect a trend away from directly managed sports and leisure facilities.

Spend in 2011/12 compared with 2010/11 (number of responding councils)

	Maintaining parks and open spaces	Managing sports and leisure facilities	Grants to others running sports leisure facilities	Litter collection and street cleaning
Spending more	1	4	2	2
Spending the same	15	12	21	22
Spending less	22	19	11	8

Often these budget reductions have been achieved by re-tendering or re-negotiating contracts with commercial service providers. A few others have managed to squeeze out further cost efficiencies or make more savings in the back office. New business models also feature, with one local authority contracting a leisure trust, one setting up a wholly-owned company and one in-house team becoming an independent service provider. That said, there are two examples of service provision being brought back in-house.

Rural practice and innovation – St Edmundsbury

St Edmundsbury Borough Council is one which supports community litter picking groups. Local groups can contact the council's waste management department to request delivery of equipment such as rubbish bags and litter pickers. The Council will then come back to take-away and dispose of the rubbish that is collected.

Community groups may contact the Council at any time of the year, though there is always heightened interest following the spring cleaning campaign run by Suffolk's Greenest County Group, which takes place around March. Eight groups from rural areas alone have come forward in the first five months of 2011/12, collecting 100 or more sacks of litter from their neighbourhoods. Much of this interest comes about as a result of parish and town councils or ward member activity. Community groups who have taken part include cubs and scouts, youth groups, a primary school and community centres.

These efforts are in addition to anything which the Council would do itself through its street cleaning team. Typically the community litter picks provide more of a 'deep clean', working on areas that might otherwise be overlooked, such as drainage ditches.

As St Edmundsbury says of the litter picking groups, "it's fantastic goodwill really". One outcome from the Council's Rural Action Plan is that it hopes to be able do more to support such community groups from 2012 and to put this work onto a more organised footing.

Policy impacts and responses

The Rural Services Network districts were asked what difference they thought residents in their rural communities would see as a result of these funding changes.

One common response was that there would not be any obvious differences. This may be typical of authorities which re-tendered or re-negotiated service contracts, if they have managed to retain the same specification for those services. It should also be noted that some authorities were yet to complete reviews of their service provision.

Elsewhere the cuts were impacting on:

- *Frequency*: many districts said they were now providing services less often. This variously affected the frequency of roadside verge grass cutting, open space grass cutting, litter picking, street cleaning, weed spraying and tree planting activity. One described maintaining its open spaces only to “an acceptable appearance”;
- *Management*: quite a few had transferred or hoped to transfer service delivery to parish and town councils in their area. This was most often mentioned in terms of park and open space maintenance. One district planned to transfer the management of a local nature reserve to a trust;
- *Specification*: service levels have been downgraded in some places. Quoted examples were less upkeep of leisure facilities, the grassing over of flower beds and the reduction of opening hours at leisure facilities. It is, though, perhaps notable that reducing opening hours did not feature more often in the responses;
- *Range*: in some areas specific services were being cut back or withdrawn altogether. Those mentioned included sports development work, the number of football fields maintained and reducing the range of sports facilities on offer more generally. One district was reviewing the scope to sell-off some of its open land;
- *Staffing*: a few districts cited staff reductions at their leisure facilities. Another was withdrawing funding for a local nature reserve which paid for the wardens. One more was cutting street cleaning staff and relying more on community initiatives or local litter picking groups;
- *Cost*: higher charges did not get a frequent mention, though an earlier survey for the Rural Services Network found they were being widely contemplated. In this latest survey one response had been to raise car parking charges at leisure facilities.

It should also be mentioned that some districts said services for their rural communities were improving. One interesting response came from a district which was investing in its leisure facilities in order to attract more paying users through the door.

Rural practice and innovation – South Kesteven

South Kesteven District Council operates and has recently expanded a Community Cleaner Scheme. This provides small grants to participating parish and town councils, so that they can enhance the appearance of their area.

The scheme is flexible in scope and the only stipulation from the District Council is that it must include some litter picking. Parish and town councils variously also use the scheme to fund things such as weeding and street sign cleaning. One key feature is that this is additional to (rather than replacing) the street cleaning which is managed by the District Council. However, what it means is that litter picking happens more often and other local environmental improvements take place.

Initially the District Council negotiated different grant sums with individual parish and town councils. The recent expansion of the scheme, though, has been on a different basis; the eleven parishes which joined the scheme have each been given a fixed amount, sufficient to cover two hours work per week. On top of this the District provides all the equipment – such as pickers, litter bags and protective clothing – plus some training.

Londonthorpe Parish Council, just to the north-east of Grantham, is one beneficiary of the scheme and it employs a community cleaner for three hours per week. At the larger Bourne

Town Council, a market town which sits astride the A15 towards the south of the District, a community cleaner is employed for 6 hours per week.

South Kesteven sees real benefit from having such a locally managed service. It knows that priorities for this type of service are better understood and more easily sorted out at the community level. It also feels that people may be less likely to drop litter in the first place if they know that the issue is owned by the local community.

Some districts could point towards policies or initiatives which specifically sought to protect or improve services for their rural communities. In many cases this involved working with parish and town councils, either by devolving services and funding to them, transferring assets to them or encouraging them to top-up the contracted service delivered by the district.

Two districts said they have developed community outreach sports and leisure provision to smaller settlements and another noted having adopted a local delivery team approach to its street cleaning and litter collection services.

Others, meanwhile, were reviewing rural needs for and rural provision of these services. Responses to-date included making rural provision a strand in Open Spaces Strategies and having a rural provision policy within their Leisure Strategy (which was linked to the Local Development Plan).

Conclusions

It might be assumed that rural areas would score well in terms of these local environmental facilities. This is partially true, though the picture is a fairly complex one. Rural residents' use of them and levels of satisfaction with them are not dissimilar to those in urban areas. What is more pronounced is the variation in usage between different rural areas.

The evidence base does indeed show rural areas scoring rather well on some environmental quality measures, such as the extent of graffiti, fly posting and litter on open land. However, one obvious issue is the amount of detritus that is found on rural roads.

Budget cuts are most obviously being felt in terms of maintenance of parks and open spaces, and spend on council-managed sports and leisure facilities. This is having a wide range of impacts, though with policy review ongoing in many local authority areas their full extent may be hard to gauge properly. One common response, however, is to seek greater parish and town council involvement in the running of these services and facilities. Managing local environmental services is well established territory for the parish and town councils sector, though its capacity to take on significantly more (especially if funding is tight or even non-existent) will be a key issue.

PART B – UPDATE ON LAST YEAR’S TOPICS

Four other service areas were covered by the 2010 version of this Rural Services Network report. They were primary schools, affordable housing, facilities for young people and support services for older people. In this 2011 report they are *not* revisited in detail. Rather, below are short sections which update some of last year’s findings.

Primary schools

Main findings from our 2010 report:

- The quality of rural schools (measured by academic standards) is generally good;
- Primary schools remain the most accessible of public services for rural communities;
- However, school reviews and threats of closure remain a genuine concern;
- Few affordable homes and an ageing population contribute to falling school rolls;
- Delivering a range of (specialist) education provision is challenging in rural areas;
- School collaboration and the sharing of resources are becoming fairly common.

Educational attainment: some interesting findings have become available about Key Stage 2 test results (taken by age 11 pupils) during 2008²⁵. On the one hand the latest analysis confirms earlier findings that pupils attending rural schools perform slightly better than those at urban schools. Indeed, this pattern holds true for each of the tested subjects. It also shows that the best results of all come from schools in the smallest rural settlements.

Per cent of pupils achieving level 4 in Key Stage 2 tests in 2008, by location of school

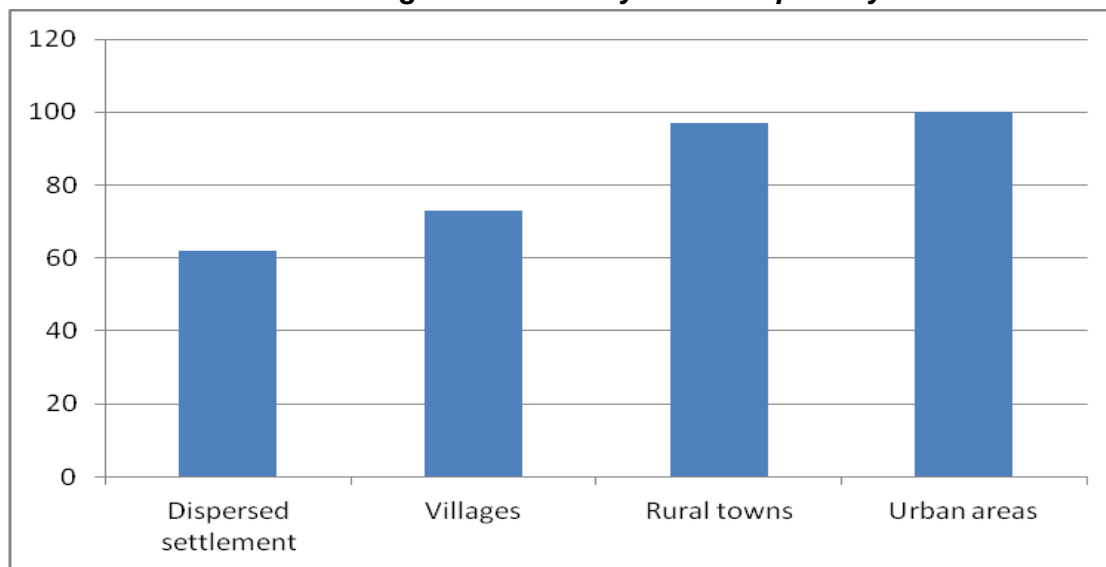
	English	Maths	Science
Villages and dispersed settlements	86%	83%	90%
Rural towns	84%	82%	90%
Urban areas	81%	78%	87%

However, the Department for Education re-analysed its Key Stage 2 data, making allowance for child poverty levels in different areas. Once that factor was taken into account the picture reversed and pupils from rural areas actually performed slightly worse than their urban counterparts. For example, taking only areas with the highest child poverty rates (the worst decile nationally), 57% of pupils from rural areas and 61% of pupils from urban areas achieved level 4. Or taking areas with middling degrees of child poverty (the fourth decile), 70% of pupils from rural areas and 72% of pupils from urban areas achieved level 4.

²⁵ Commission for Rural Communities, 2010 (1)

Accessibility: data for 2011 shows that there were 5,203 primary schools in rural England, little changed from the previous year²⁶. Evidence about school closures²⁷ shows that in many cases they amalgamate with another school (though this still means there is one less school). Nonetheless, almost 31% of primary schools are located in rural areas – a high share, given that 19% of the population lives in a rural area and reflecting the fact that many rural schools have a small in-take.

Per cent of households living within 2kms by road of a primary school in 2010²⁸



As the chart above shows, the smaller the settlement the less likely households are to live near to a primary school. For many rural children walking to school is not a realistic option.

Pupil numbers: there were over 617,000 pupils²⁹ attending state primary schools in rural locations in 2009, which means 86% of available places in those schools were taken. The vacancy rate was slightly higher than in urban primary schools, where 90% of places were filled, making rural schools more vulnerable if a local review of provision is undertaken.

Some 7% of those pupils attending rural primary schools take-up free school meals. This compares with 19% in urban primary schools. The difference between those percentages appears larger than might be expected from other data about household incomes³⁰, which begs the question whether there is lower take-up among eligible pupils in rural areas.

Extended services: by 2009 almost 85% of rural schools provided the full range of 'core' extended services (such as wrap-around childcare and study support) according to the Training & Development Agency. Although less than urban schools (90%), this continues a fairly rapid spread of extended services. Caution should be applied to these figures, though, as they relate to both primary and secondary schools and include extended services offered through external providers.

²⁶ Commission for Rural Communities, 2011 (1)

²⁷ Commission for Rural Communities, 2010 (2)

²⁸ The data in this chart is for 'less sparse' areas only, though these are the great majority of areas.

²⁹ Commission for Rural Communities, 2010 (2)

³⁰ For example, data on the numbers of low income households.

Funding: it is finally worth noting that schools budgets appear to be relatively protected from the cuts being experienced elsewhere in local public service funding. A 2011 survey for the Rural Services Network³¹ found this to be true among predominantly rural local authorities.

Affordable housing for local people

Main findings from our 2010 report:

- Housing is particularly unaffordable for local people who live in rural areas;
- Many potential buyers of mixed tenure housing cannot now obtain a mortgage;
- Forecasts imply a significant shortfall in grant funding to build new social housing;
- Rural areas have seen rising repossessions and unintentional homelessness;
- Migration from urban to rural areas and an ageing population will drive demand.

House building: according to research for the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH)³² the volume of house building starts across England rose to 103,000 in 2010, though this was from a historically low level in 2009 (the lowest peace-time level since the 1920s). It remains far short of the roughly 245,000 additional households which are forming each year.

In R80 rural areas the 2009/10 rate of both house building starts and house building completions (per head of population) remains noticeably higher than it is in urban areas³³.

In terms of social housing, the level of new completions remains fairly high, though much of this was awarded grant funding to go-ahead a few years ago. Recent figures show that social housing starts and completions have (in proportion to their populations) been at above national average levels in R80 rural areas, but below national average levels in R50 rural areas. Other anecdotal evidence³⁴ points to many housing associations now preferring to focus on easier and larger urban development sites.

Prices and affordability: information in the table below is drawn from the Halifax Rural Housing Review³⁵. It highlights the extent of house price rises and housing affordability issues in some rural districts.

Least affordable rural district	East Devon	9.1	Ratio of average house sale prices to annual gross earnings 2010
Most expensive rural district	South Oxfordshire	£388,000	Average house sale price 2009/10
Biggest price rise in a rural district	Craven (in North Yorkshire)	180%	Average house sale price, comparing 2009/10 with 1999/00
Fewest first-time buyers rural district	Wychavon (in Worcestershire)	13%	Proportion of all buyers 2009/10 who were first-time buyers

³¹ Brian Wilson Associates, 2011

³² Pawson H and S Wilcox, 2011

³³ Defra and Government Statistical Service, 2011

³⁴ Commission for Rural Communities, 2011 (2)

³⁵ Halifax, 2010

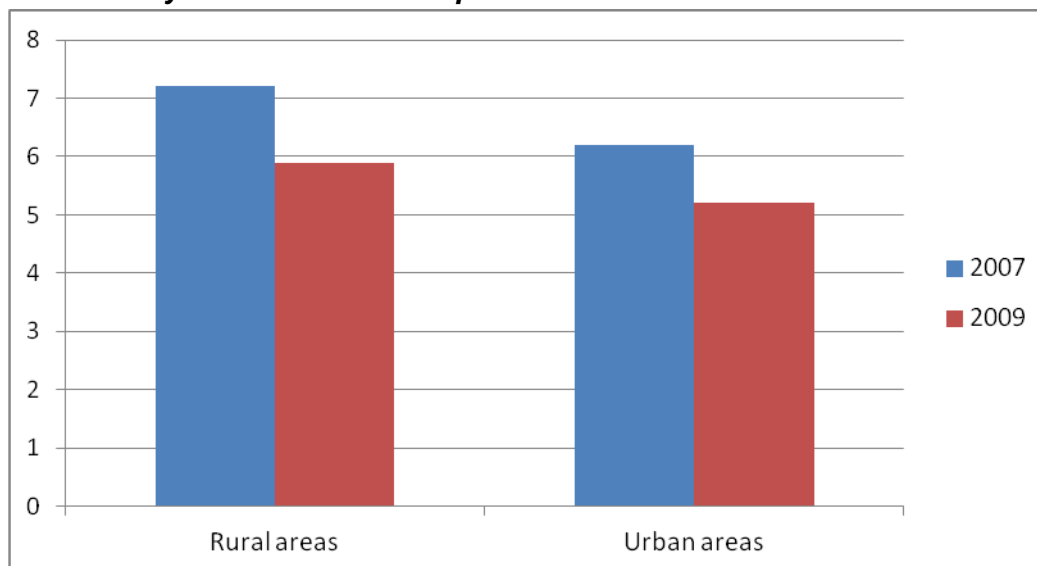
Research by the National Housing Federation³⁶ found that the 'affordability gap' between wages and house prices had widened in every rural district over the decade to 2009. House prices had gone up a remarkable 125% while local wages had risen just 37%.

Meanwhile, analysis using September 2010 data from the Land Registry³⁷ concluded that average rural house prices were around £42,000 higher than their urban equivalents.

The price of housing peaked in 2007, though the picture since then has varied with some areas experiencing rises again during 2010. Especially notable is that average house prices have fallen by just 1.4% in dispersed rural settlements (2007 to 2010), whereas they fell between 8% and 9% in urban areas and in rural towns.

Analysts often look at the ratio of house prices to household incomes. In 2009 the average rural house cost 5.9 times the average rural household's income – down from 6.8 times in 2008 and 7.2 times in 2007.

Affordability ratio of house sale prices to median annual household income



Mortgage availability: mortgage interest rates fell again³⁸ in 2010 to an average of 3.6%. At this low level and with improved affordability ratios, purchasing a house should have become easier. However, the main barrier has been the limited availability of low-deposit mortgages. It is reported that shared ownership (or mixed tenure) housing scheme have been badly affected by this.

As have first-time buyers. National figures from the Council of Mortgage Lenders³⁹ show that first-time buyers, who needed £12,000 for a deposit in 2007, need £26,000 for one in 2011. Put another way, they required 41% of a median salary four years ago, but need 87%

³⁶ National Housing Federation, 2011

³⁷ Commission for Rural Communities, 2011 (2)

³⁸ Pawson H & S Wilcox, 2011

³⁹ Butterworth M, 2011

of a median salary now. Little wonder, then, that the number of mortgage advances to first-time buyers remained low in 2010 at 200,000⁴⁰. This is the lowest UK figure for 40 years.

The Halifax Rural Housing Survey⁴¹ showed that first-time buyers form a relatively modest part of the rural housing market. They account for just 27% of all buyers in rural areas, but 45% of all buyers in urban areas. This no doubt reflects both housing affordability and the propensity of young people to move away to urban areas.

Housing need: recent data shows that:

- The number of people who are on rural local authority waiting lists for affordable homes has increased to around 750,000⁴²;
- The proportion of people who are homeless in predominantly rural districts fell again during 2009/10, continuing a long term downward trend⁴³;
- The proportion of people who are in temporary accommodation in rural districts fell again during 2009/10, continuing a fairly long term trend.

Going forward: there seems little doubt that rural housing markets will remain to be subdued as long as the wider economy remains flat. That aside, future trends in both market and affordable housing may be subject to a period of considerable uncertainty as planning, housing and welfare policies undergo reform (albeit some of those changes are intended to stimulate the market).

Nonetheless, local authorities continue to innovate as they attempt to increase the supply of affordable rural housing. Cornwall Council is now seeking to launch a shared equity loan scheme for local first-time buyers. It is also proposing a planning policy to allow some market housing to be built alongside affordable housing on exceptions sites, providing an element of cross-subsidy. This will only be permitted, however, where it is considered essential to site delivery, it meets local needs, there is community support and it requires no public subsidy. Babergh District Council, meanwhile, has formed a Land Development Group, which co-ordinates efforts to find suitable council-owned land and then make it available for affordable housing schemes at up to 100% discount⁴⁴.

Facilities for young people

Main findings from our 2010 report:

- Key issues are the viability of services in rural areas and the lack of public transport;
- Poor access to training and employment opportunities make it hard to stay local;
- Careers advice is generally good whilst at school, but is hard to access afterwards;
- Confidential advice services may be best provided outside of smaller settlements;
- Young people say sports centres, clubs and activities would most improve their area.

⁴⁰ Pawson H & S Wilcox, 2011

⁴¹ Halifax, 2010

⁴² National Housing Federation, 2011

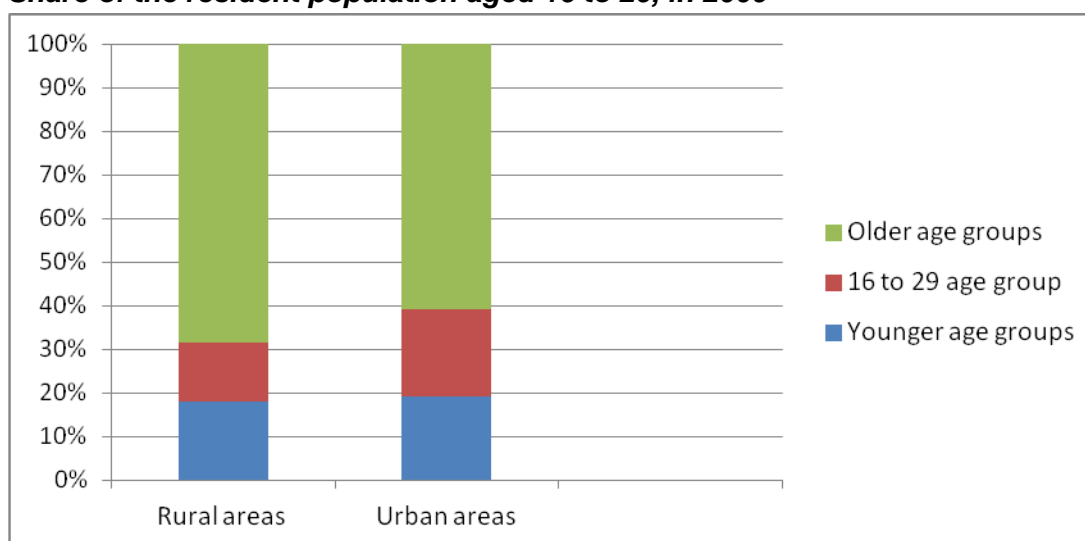
⁴³ Defra and Government Statistical Service, 2011

⁴⁴ Babergh District Council, 2010

Population: young people are under-represented within the rural population (see chart below). In 2009 those aged 16 to 29 made up little more than a 13% share of the rural population of England⁴⁵. This compares with a much higher 20% share in urban areas. It is the most marked rural-urban difference between any population age group.

Furthermore, the age band is unusual in that there is net migration from rural to urban areas, not least to study or find employment i.e. more 16 to 29 year olds move home from rural to urban areas than move in the other direction. There are a just few rural places which buck this trend with a net inflow of young people, such as parts of Cornwall⁴⁶.

Share of the resident population aged 16 to 29, in 2009



Accessibility: analysis for ACRE/RCAN⁴⁷ has shown that Further Education (FE) colleges are difficult to reach for a minority of the young people in rural England. Some 4.7% of them live more than one hour’s travel time from their nearest FE college. Figures reported specifically for young people in rural Norfolk were slightly higher still (5.0%). RSN member, LANDEX, gave evidence about accessibility and related issues to a recent Parliamentary Select Committee inquiry on 16 to 19 year old participation in education and training.

Jobcentres are not, of course, solely of interest to young people and many people will access their basic services online. However, in last year’s report we found that access to employment opportunities was seen as a particular issue for rural young people. This will have been especially important for the 5.7% of 16-18 year olds living in predominantly rural local authority areas in 2008 who were classified as NEETs – that is, they were not in employment, education or training.

Data for 2011⁴⁸ showed that:

- Physically accessing a Jobcentre mostly involved visiting an urban centre, with only 17 Jobcentres still located in a rural settlement i.e. with less than 10,000 population;

⁴⁵ Defra and Government Statistical Service, 2011

⁴⁶ Commission for Rural Communities, 2010 (1)

⁴⁷ ACRE, RCAN and OCSI, 2011

⁴⁸ Commission for Rural Communities, 2011 (1)

- There had been three times that number in rural settlements in the year 2000 and clearly the delivery model for Jobcentre services has shifted;
- Only 38% of rural households were, by 2011, living within 5 miles (by road) of a Jobcentre.

Priority for action: improving activities for teenagers is seen as a current priority by 15% of rural residents⁴⁹ (of all adult ages), making it their third highest quality of life priority. This 2010 figure is slightly less than that obtained from the previous such survey, though this may simply reflect other concerns having become more important e.g. employment and training opportunities now ranks higher and is itself of huge importance for young people.

It is notable that improving activities for teenagers was rated more highly by rural residents from northern regions than it was by rural residents from southern regions, though again this may reflect other issues, like the lack of affordable housing, ranking higher in the south.

Funding: in a recent Local Government Association survey⁵⁰ services for young people were near the top of a list for those which local authorities were targeting for proportionately large budget cuts. Similar findings came back from a survey for the Rural Services Network⁵¹ of its members, with some saying that services supporting young people would become more targeted at those with the greatest needs.

Support services for older people

Main findings from our 2010 report:

- Older people are healthier and have stronger support networks in rural areas;
- However, 30% of those aged 65 and over in rural areas have some social care need;
- Numbers in need are projected to grow fastest in rural areas – by a very significant 70% in 20 years;
- Day care centres, home support, self-directed support and carers support are seen as harder to deliver in rural areas;
- This is due to high costs, problems recruiting staff, limited public transport and urban-centred provision.

Population: older people are over-represented within the rural population. In 2009 those of retirement age (women aged 60 plus and men aged 65 plus) made up a 24% share of the rural population of England⁵². This compares with a lower 18% share in urban areas. The retired population is most prominent of all in small (rural) towns in sparse areas, where it forms over 29% of the population.

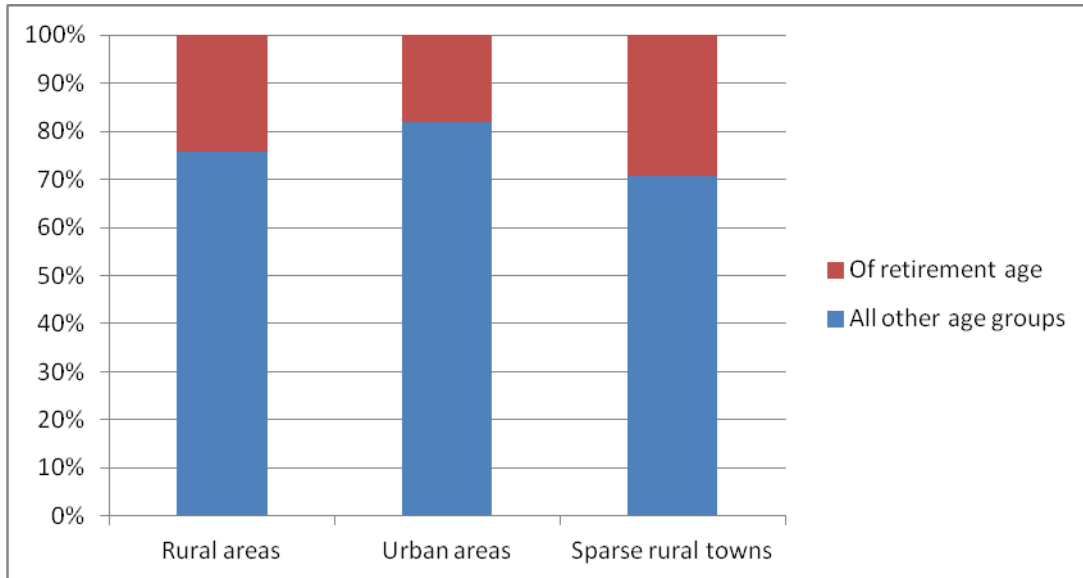
⁴⁹ Ipsos MORI, 2010

⁵⁰ Local Government Association Analysis & Research, 2011

⁵¹ Brian Wilson Associates, 2011

⁵² Defra and Government Statistical Service, 2011

Share of the resident population which is of retirement age, in 2009



In large part this older age profile reflects patterns of migration between rural and urban areas. However, it is notable that life expectancy is higher for those born in rural areas. That is particularly true in R50 local authority areas, where an average man born in 2007-09 was expected to live almost until their 80th birthday and an average woman beyond their 83rd birthday.

Accessibility: data from the Elderly Accommodation Council database shows that there are almost 4,400 sheltered housing developments located in rural settlements, containing almost 100,000 sheltered dwellings. The majority of these have a resident warden. This, however, means that only 16% of sheltered housing is located in a rural settlement, where – by comparison – 23% of England’s retired population live.

Whilst they are most certainly not the only users, older people are relatively heavy users of healthcare services and of post offices. Figures for 2011⁵³ show that:

- The share of GP surgeries located in rural settlements is in proportion to the size of the rural population (20% of all surgeries). Numbers in rural settlements have increased;
- The share of pharmacies located in rural settlements is low in relation to the rural population (12% of all pharmacies);
- The share of hospitals located in rural settlements is very low in relation to the rural population (11% of all hospitals), reflecting their role as a higher tier service; and
- The share of post offices located in rural settlements is very high in relation to the rural population (44% of all post offices), though the actual number in rural settlements has decreased.

Take-up of help: not so recent analysis of 2006 Family Resources Survey data⁵⁴ showed that low income pensioners living in villages and isolated dwellings were significantly less likely to claim their entitlement to Pension Credit than those living in urban settlements.

⁵³ Commission for Rural Communities, 2011 (1), except hospitals statistic which is CRC 2010 (1)

⁵⁴ Commission for Rural Communities, 2007

Claimant levels in rural towns, though, were around urban levels. It is not known if this reflects poor access to support and information, less willingness to claim or other factors.

Mapping of 2009 data from the Department of Work & Pensions shows many rural areas have a relatively high proportion of their population in receipt of Attendance Allowance – a non-means tested payment to those aged 65 and over with a disability. This almost certainly reflects their sizeable elderly population. High proportions in receipt show up in places like the West Country, the Marches, north Norfolk and Cumbria, whilst rural places in London’s commuter belt have low proportions in receipt.

The pattern is different for receipt of Carers Allowance – a means-tested payment to those spending at least 35 hours per week looking after someone with a disability⁵⁵. The proportion of the population in receipt is generally low in rural areas (when compared with urban areas). Exceptions include the Lincolnshire coast, upland County Durham and the Cumbrian coast.

Funding: in the recent Local Government Group membership survey⁵⁶ a large number of respondents said that Councillors had sought to protect adult social care from budget and service cuts. Similarly, a recent survey for the Rural Services Network⁵⁷ did not identify adult social care as among the service areas most affected by cutbacks. Nonetheless, there have been many media reports of local authorities tightening their eligibility criteria for providing support.

⁵⁵ Not all of those with a disability will be older people.

⁵⁶ Local Government Association Analysis & Research, 2011

⁵⁷ Brian Wilson Associates, 2011

Concluding comments

This report has put a number of public services under the rural microscope, using some of the latest available research or data about trends in their provision and gathering current intelligence from the membership of the Rural Services Network.

As might be expected at a time of austerity, most of those trends appear to be pointing in a downward direction. Rural bus services seem widely to be subject to cuts, library services remain at risk in many places and maintenance of parks and open spaces is frequently being scaled back. Moreover, the RSN views this trend as happening from a low starting base, because of the historic pattern of (relative) underfunding of public services in rural areas. However, the situation remains fairly complex. It is possible, too, to point to a growing number of rural primary schools which offer extended services and to the number of social housing completions holding up.

Re-analysis of the 2008 Place Survey has provided some fascinating new insight into rural communities' use of cultural, leisure and environmental services, and about their satisfaction with them. In most cases they are found to use such local services less than urban communities. In many cases they also express lower levels of satisfaction with those services. We can speculate – though the data cannot prove this – that it is due (at least in part) to poor access to these services for some rural communities and to there being more basic facilities than would typically be provided in urban centres.

The 2011/12 financial year is the first in which the squeeze on public finances announced by the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review Budget takes effect. However, its impact on service provision in rural areas is very evident throughout this report. The reduction in central Government grant to local authorities has been front-loaded – that is, the largest cut is that made between 2010/11 and 2011/12. It should not be assumed, though, that the worst in service reductions is now over. Central Government grant will continue shrinking for another three financial years and it may be that some services reach a critical point during that period or that the scope for efficiency savings is exhausted so that any further impacts hit the frontline. One notable finding is that many rural local authorities have ongoing service reviews which they expect to result in further reductions. Indeed, a recent report for Defra has concluded that public service providers cannot continue trimming budgets year after year without there being serious consequences; if services are to be maintained they will soon need to replace this with an approach which seeks to do things differently⁵⁸.

The weakness of the wider economy is equally evident in the update information this report contains on affordable housing in rural areas. Potential first time buyers are finding it hard to obtain a mortgage. This is severely affecting shared-ownership housing schemes, as well as purchases on the open market, presumably increasing further the demand for rented social housing. The number of people on rural local authority waiting lists has risen.

⁵⁸ Hindle R and I Annibal, 2011

On a more positive note, there is considerable evidence of rural communities and bodies like parish and town councils playing an important role and an increasingly active role in public service provision. This matches the findings from earlier work by the Rural Services Network. Volunteers are widely being looked towards to help deliver branch library services. Parish and town councils are frequently seen as key players in delivering maintenance of the local environment and local leisure facilities. This, of course, is very much in tune with the sort of Government aspirations for localism laid out in its Open Public Services White Paper⁵⁹. It follows that the willingness, capacity and ability of volunteers and of parish and town councils, in particular, may prove crucial to service provision in rural areas.

It is a mute point how far this is happening in order to improve services or whether it simply derives from necessity. On the one hand there is fairly wide acceptance that community-level delivery is well suited where local knowledge and the ability to deliver services flexibly are important. It can also generate softer benefits such as community pride and greater neighbourliness. Some examples of rural practice and innovation cited in this report explicitly see this community activity as being additional to the services delivered by the statutory sector. This could take the form of extra litter picking or it could be to offer longer opening hours at branch libraries. On the other hand it is clear that community-level delivery is often coming about because the alternative is that those services will be closed. In which case, it may be a matter of retaining services rather than improving them.

What does not seem to be in doubt is that there is a wealth of interesting practice and innovation in rural public service delivery to be tapped. In some cases this is re-configuring the way services are provided. This report has been able to highlight a few examples drawn from Rural Services Network member authorities. At least two of these address the issue of higher rural service delivery costs head-on. Some seek to reduce costs and increase efficiency through service co-location or integration.

Inevitably, many are subject to a degree of ongoing review or development and so would benefit revisiting once they have bedded in. If nothing else, it is hoped that they raise questions and assist thinking about future rural service provision in other areas.

⁵⁹ HM Government, 2011

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