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Rural Communities and the Big Society

Context

The rural 'Big Society' is already well developed. New government policies can offer opportunities to strengthen local action within communities by building on what already works well. This can help manage the inevitable reduction in public service expenditure, whilst bolstering the vibrancy and sustainability of rural communities.¹

¹ ACRE position paper – Implementing the Big Society

Case study

Rural Community Action Nottinghamshire

Rural Community Action Nottinghamshire (RCAN) is the primary rural development specialist organisation for the county, providing specialist rural knowledge and intelligence to influence and advocate on behalf of its rural communities.

Throughout their 85 year history, the organisation has encouraged, supported and enabled people in activities that benefit those who work and live in their local area. RCAN's main areas of expertise include rural intelligence, community planning and support, transport and access, health, economic regeneration, the environment, and regional rural policy influence.

An important area of RCAN's work is assisting parishes with their preparation of community led plans, helping them overcome difficulties by providing support and advice, raising issues at strategic levels, improving communication, providing encouragement and using their experience of similar problems elsewhere to assist others.

One example of this in practice is Normanton on Soar, where building on a parish plan enabled parishioners to open a new village hall and community shop. The parish council also received recognition with a quality status.

For more information visit www.rcan.org.uk



East Midlands Dimension

The population of the East Midlands is estimated at 4.5 million with around 30% of people living in rural areas. 88% of East Midlands' land area is classified as rural making it the third most rural region in England.

The East Midlands rural population is both growing and ageing faster than in any other region and faster than the urban population.² Population growth inevitably puts pressure on existing rural facilities and resources. This has implications for local capacity to cope with increased demand for services.

Rural parts of the East Midlands find it difficult to retain high levels of enterprise and skills locally as people are drawn by businesses in urban areas. There are however relatively high levels of activity in agriculture, forestry, fishing and tourism which are inherent to the countryside.³ New policy developments associated with the Big Society will need to link with the socio-economic realities of rural communities.

The average rural home in the East Midlands costs 8.5 times the average regional income⁴ resulting in a growing affordable rural housing crisis. This is particularly evident in the high value rural locations of the Peak District and Rutland in contrast to the relative poverty of the former North Nottinghamshire coalfields and coastal Lincolnshire. More flexible local planning policies will enable villages to grow and adapt to economic circumstances and meet local housing needs.

The rural VCS comprises 5 countywide Rural Community Action networks, a regional presence for the CPRE and numerous smaller voluntary and community groups working directly in and with rural communities.

Challenges and opportunities

Affordable housing, transport, climate change, unemployment and an ageing population have an impact on how services are delivered to rural communities and how communities are going to engage and participate in delivering the Big Society.

Access to services is a priority for rural communities and individuals, due to rural isolation and exclusion. Local evidence demonstrates that individuals in rural areas are disadvantaged in their ability to undertake normal activities unless they have access to a car at all times.⁵

Parish Paths and the former Rural Action Scheme have encouraged rural communities to come forward with their own ideas in response to specific intervention areas. These models encourage community participation in analysing and appraising local needs and resources and further devising solutions and means for service delivery. Such models position rural communities well for applying principles of the Big Society.

Volunteering in rural communities has always been popular. The running and maintenance of village halls, maintaining public paths and community care consistently attracts volunteers. In addition, the role of the Parish Councillor, although considered centrally as a democratic layer, relies heavily on voluntary principles and community ownership for success. There are a relatively high proportion of people at pensionable ages in rural areas offering a potential pool of volunteers. However rural isolation due to sparse settlement patterns is a challenge for participation in delivering the Big Society. Resources are needed to support, maintain and link volunteers.

² East Midlands Development Agency (emda) www.intelligenceeastmidlands.org.uk

³ East Midlands Rural Affairs Forum <http://www.ruralaffairs.org.uk/uploads/plan/Framework.pdf>

⁴ East Midlands Rural Affairs Forum <http://www.ruralaffairs.org.uk/uploads/plan/Framework.pdf>

⁵ Social Exclusion Unit Report – Making the Connections, 2004

Broadband technology has transformed the ability of communities to access services and information. There is however a desperate need for investment to support broadband improvements in rural areas where speeds are lower and connectivity can be intermittent. In some areas there is no connectivity at all.⁶ Rural communities are sparsely populated and improving broadband services will enable people to be able to access and plan services from the comfort of their homes.

A regional focus on rural issues, through the East Midlands Rural Affairs Forum has been crucial for maintaining strategic development of issues such as affordable housing, transport and broadband. These issues cannot be addressed with a purely local focus but must be strategically developed in consideration of wider socioeconomic factors.

Impact of National Policy

The **Localism Bill 2010** extends new rights to communities including the ‘right to buy and right to bid’ and will enable local communities to take ownership and control of key local facilities. Traditionally rural communities respond to market failure with community led approaches which help minimize the impact on those most in need of local services.⁷

The **Housing Minister** has announced the intention to give rural communities that want to build new homes, the power to bypass planning processes. This will encourage communities to take local initiatives to respond to local needs.⁸ There are challenges associated with community capacity where local housing trust proposals bypass the planning system and local authorities cannot assess and agree physical changes to road access, drainage and other infrastructure.

The **Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs** has announced its intention to reform public forestry land estate and is selling off Forestry Commission land. However there is controversy in this scheme as many people believe this type of land is at risk and needs protection. The VCS in rural areas has an opportunity to take over land where they think their role and involvement will enhance protection and conservation of the environment.⁹

The **Rural Development Programme for England** is an EU funded programme delivered at regional level for the development of the rural economy. RDPE in the East Midlands funds a number of progressive and successful rural programmes. RDPE is currently supported by the Regional Development Agency for the East Midlands (emda) and the announcement to abolish the RDAs puts this valuable programme, alongside other major European regional investments, in jeopardy.

⁶ East Midlands Rural Affairs Forum <http://www.ruralaffairs.org.uk/uploads/plan/Framework.pdf>

⁷ Acre (2010) Building the Big Society

⁸ <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pagelId=12784563>

⁹ <http://www.buildinglanduk.co.uk/forestry-land-for-sale.htm>