working with people and communities to improve the quality of life in rural Cumbria

"A LOSS FOR EVERYONE"

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SERVICE WITHDRAWAL IN CUMBRIAN RURAL COMMUNITIES

SUSTAINABLE RURAL SERVICES
INTERIM STUDY REPORT - APRIL 2007

"It felt like a real loss. A loss of convenience and a loss of a focal point for all in the village. A loss for everyone really."

Contents

Summary

About the Project

In April 2006, VAC began a project which aims to capture the real experiences arising from the decline in the level of service provision to Cumbrian rural communities.

Fair access to health and social care, education and training, banking, shops and cultural facilities is recognised as an essential part of every day life in the UK.

Government is committed[1] to providing *modern and efficient public services driven by the needs and choices of the public*. Following up on this commitment, the Local Government White Paper[2] seeks continued improvement in these public services and in the quality of life of communities. It builds on what is described[3] as a guiding principle that *no one should be disadvantaged because of where they live* and aims to give local people and communities more influence and power to improve their lives.

Rural services are increasingly under threat. Economic factors, falling customer numbers, Government policy, demographic change and changes in consumer expectations are among a wide range of pressures operating on public, private and voluntary and community sector services.

The Sustainable Rural Services project, funded by Defra through the RSCP[4] aims to:-

- Identify local and national best practice in managing service withdrawal.
- Evidence the experience of communities after a loss or reduction in service.
- Assemble a Guidance Pack of use to communities, and an Advice Sheet of use to local authorities and service providers.
- Raise awareness of service loss, rural equity and social exclusion.

Between April 2007 and the end of March 2008, the Sustainable Rural Services Project will:

- Assemble a Guidance Pack for communities facing service change or loss.
- Undertake an action research project testing the applicability of the Guidance Pack.
- Produce guidance for service providers aiming to change or remove a service from a rural community.
- Hold a conference to present the findings of this Study, and the Project's further research, and raise awareness of the impact of service change or loss.
- Produce a final report of the Project's findings and activity.

The Study So Far

This qualitative study aims to examine the **consequences of change** in rural communities that have seen a loss or a change in a key local service. Examples of services include shops, post offices and health care.

We have worked from the principles that:-

- A change in service can be as challenging as a total withdrawal.
- The feelings of individuals are a key element of that community's experience of the change.
- People's perceptions of changes in a service, are valid data to record.

Working with five development agencies, we identified all rural communities in the County that have experienced a loss or change of service. From this, we selected a sample of eight communities that acknowledges the diversity of

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[1] 'Releasing the resources to meet the challenges ahead: value for money in the 2007 CSR'
[2] Strong and Prosperous Communities, DCLG, October 2006
[3] Para 2.6
[4] Rural Social and Community Programme, a funding programme designed to develop the capacity of the Voluntary and Community and parish council sectors.

rural communities in Cumbria, from substantial market towns to sparse rural communities. We then contacted 21 individuals within those communities, and conducted in-depth interviews with 13 of them. The interviews were designed to examine the nature of the change as perceived by those individuals, its effect on them, and their understanding of its effect on the wider community. We were particularly interested in the experiences of those who are unable to exercise the level of choice that may be available to others.

Findings

- Where services are reduced, for most people involved, **a loss generates strong, negative feelings**. People are angry and disappointed, and feel ignored.

- Where the community has worked together to replace a service, such **social enterprises generate strong, positive feelings**. People are excited and empowered, and are proud of the positive action that has been taken.

- **Communities feel that no-one cares** and no-one is helping them. They feel 'let down' by the service provider.

- Local **people make changes** when services are withdrawn. Those able to travel do so. Others move house or rely on helpful friends. Small, local businesses can close.

- Closure of a service means that **older people lose choice and independence**, and have to rely on lifts from family and friends.

- There is often a gap in time between one service closing and another opening. Such **a time lag causes problems** for local people and for the new service.

- There appears to be a lack of support to owners. When a service closes, **owners are often in the firing line**, and bear the brunt of local ill-feeling.

- In affected communities, **past changes can make people fear for the future**. Even if a service is saved, this anxiety can remain.

- People value shops and post offices as a meeting place, and this **social contact is what people miss** the most.

- It should be recognised that **not all closures are because of outside intervention**, and some are a result of poor health, bad practices, or simply retirement.

- In most cases, **Post Office Limited were the only agency** involved in the process of change. In five out of six communities affected by post office service reduction, Post Office Limited's input was not valued.

- In most cases, closures mean **people have to travel more**, and are travelling to use a service that, to them, is second-rate.

Conclusions/Recommendations

The findings of this study, ongoing work with rural communities around service provision, and contacts with communities through the wider project suggests that:-

- Early warning of an intention to close or change a service would enable agencies to better support communities

- Although community solutions (for example, social enterprise models) to service problems are very popular in communities where they work, not every community is able to support such an initiative, nor should be expected to.

- Developing community solutions takes time – typically 2-3 years. Once an enterprise is up and running, it will need ongoing support, and commonly hits one or two crises points in its first five – ten years. Failure rate is high.

- Support to communities should take the form of both identifying alternatives to a changing or closing service and conflict resolution/mediation as necessary.

- Communities would benefit from a greater flexibility in the approach of Post Office Limited to closing post offices.

- The approach and involvement of the Parish Council is key to the effectiveness of any community work addressing rural service issues. Parish Councils should be supported and facilitated in this role.

- Not all communities will be able to develop solutions themselves, and not all local solutions will be sustainable in the medium to long-term.

- Local action by communities is not the only route to retain access to services. Communities should also consider how they can work with others and practitioners to influence service delivery organisations to re-configure services in order to meet their needs.

- Some contacts and interviews for this study have included requests for help from respondents. VAC should follow up these requests.

- This Summary and Report should be circulated to:
  - Participating parish councils
  - CALC
  - Cumbria Rural Forum members
  - LSPs
  - Local Authorities across Cumbria
  - GONW
  - ACRE
  - Commission for Rural Communities
  - North West Rural Community Councils
  - NW Federation of Town and Parish Councils
  - Defra Rural Services Team
  - DCLG Sustainable Communities Team
  - Post Office Ltd
  - Service delivery agencies
  - VAC members

Background to the project

*(The **Background to the project** section has been contributed by our consultant Rob Hindle of Rural Innovation, a regional expert on rural services.)*

Fair Access to Services

The challenge faced by many living in rural areas in securing equitable access to services is recognised throughout Government's rural policy. It forms part of the key issues identified by Defra as a constraint to their strategic objective (2006) of achieving 'strong rural communities' and the Secretary of State's commitment to the Prime Minister[5] to 'develop a positive approach to "places" that works for rural communities'.

Defra has a responsibility to represent the interests of rural service users across Government, and maintains 'Rural Services Standards' in an attempt to highlight the level of services that rural residents can expect to receive.

Defra's responsibility to address rural disadvantage is clearly set out in a speech given by Mr Gardiner soon after the appointment of Defra's new ministerial team in June 2006.

The Government as a whole is working to tackle disadvantage to promote equality of opportunity. This means recognising the differences within and between rural areas as well as the differences between rural and urban. And we need to recognise the common ground. In this context, Defra needs to be an active, influencing department ensuring that mainstream delivery meets rural needs – mainstreaming rural within government.

Closing statement from speech by Barry Gardiner MP on "A New Rural Agenda: Moving in from the Margins" at the IPPR North conference, London - 8 June 2006

It is clear therefore that the objective to improve access to services for rural residents remains a national policy objective for Government.

Service Withdrawal

The evidence shows however that communities and individuals across rural areas of England increasingly suffer from poor access to basic services, and can be inherently disadvantaged by the way in which publicly funded services are delivered. The contracts agreed between mainstream service providers (i.e. Primary Care Trusts, Ambulance Trusts, Library Services etc) include a set of targets and performance measures (set within Public Service Agreements). Typically these require that the service deliverer meet certain standards; for libraries in rural counties that 85% of households are within two miles of a (permanent) library. Experience and conclusions from research[6] show that these targets tend to ensure that rural households remain the most disadvantaged. In fact, any standard or target set at less than 100% of the customer group will tend to result in those that are hardest, and most expensive, to reach, being left out.

This approach to public service delivery has led to the centralisation of more and more services with the consequent withdrawal of service points (i.e. police stations, cottage hospitals, libraries, post offices etc) in rural communities. This trend towards centralisation has been accelerated by technological advances, and the need for much larger 'constituencies' of customers to support service delivery. This is particularly evident in the healthcare sector, where some services (i.e. neurological scanners) require a catchment of more than one million people.

Access Disadvantage

This loss of services from local communities affects the people that live within them, but does so in a radically different way. The result is

[5] David Miliband's letter to Tony Blair, July 2006
[6] Fair Access to Rural Services in the North West, Rural Innovation and Community Futures for GONW, 2006

that some rural residents enjoy much better levels of access than others. The reasons for this are complex but relate to the types of place that people live, the way that they live and very often the ability of people to travel to the surgery, school or shop.

The things that stop people getting fair access to services begin with the individual; how far away is he / she from the place that delivers the service, how easy it is for him / her to cover that distance, does he / she rely upon a bike, a car or a bus? Will the individual be able to get to the service outlet at a time when the service is available? These issues are the same for everybody, regardless of whether they live in the city or in the country, in a market town or a remote hamlet.

Where an individual lives **does** make a difference to their ability to secure fair access to services however; not because their needs are any different necessarily, but because of the distances involved, the relative availability of public transport and the increasingly limited choice or even availability of services in more rural and sparsely populated areas.

Quality of Life

It is not necessarily the **sort** of place that you live in that dictates how good access to services will be. After all, everybody that lives in a small village theoretically experiences the same level of access to the nearest GP's surgery – it is a similar distance away, its opening hours are constant, the bus service that connects the village and the market town is the same. What matters is not the level of access experienced, but the *quality* of that experience.

This quality is best measured in terms of the impact that accessing the service has on the individual's quality of life; what impact will making the journey have, what impact will

failure to access the service have? Those denied access, and those for whom it represents a major physical, mental or financial challenge are substantively disadvantaged, especially in comparison to those able to exercise personal choice in the manner and place that they enjoy access (to the same services). To make matters worse, it is this vulnerable group (households on low incomes or with limited personal mobility for what-ever reason - carers of young children and the ill, the elderly and infirm, the mentally ill) for whom **local** access is most important.

Research[7] has shown that these groups are the most common users of services located within local communities (post offices, village halls, shops); for example research by ERM Ltd for Postwatch and the Commission for Rural Communities (2006) showed that rural post offices are used by older people (over 65), carers, those on low income and disabled people more than other groups, and that the incidence of use by this group is increasing.

Research carried out in the North West[8] shows that access to basic services (post office, shop, primary school, community building of some sort) within their community is one of the benchmarks for rural taxpayers in determining whether the access that they have to services is 'fair and equitable'. Post offices, shops and community buildings were also identified as one of very few services where local accessibility (i.e. proximity and ease of access) was considered to be more important that the quality or incidence of availability – it is more important to have some access locally, regardless of its relative quality, than to travel for a full/higher quality service.

National research has consistently shown[9] that when local services such as post offices close, many people suffer a loss of independence and become reliant on others in the community or on public transport. 86% of respondents to the

[7] Fair Access to Rural Services in the North West, Rural Innovation for GONW, 2006
[8] Customer Needs Research, ERM for Postwatch and Commission for Rural Communities, 2006
[8] Fair Access to Rural Services, Rural Innovation for GONW, 2006
[9] Postwatch 2002, ERM for Postwatch and CRC 2006, CRC 2006

Postwatch Survey felt that losing a post office means 'a lot of people lose their independence' and over a quarter (27%) found it difficult to get to another post office when their local one closed.

These closures also have an impact on the 'sustainability' of the community, both in terms of its ability to support a diverse range of residents (those without personal mobility alongside those with it) and in the worst case scenario in terms of a settlement's planning status. Many local authorities apply a test of sustainability based upon the existence of key services (post office, shop, pub, primary school etc), and use this as a benchmark to determine whether a village is capable of supporting growth and investment, particularly in terms of the allocation of housing (affordable and market) units.

Rural Service Decline

The trends towards centralisation of services and the impact on rural services of Government targets for service delivery described earlier have contributed towards changes in the level of access to services experienced by many rural communities. These changes have been recorded by the Countryside Agency/Commission for Rural Communities State of the Countryside Report series (2000–2006).

Extracts and commentary included below show the latest recorded observations.

Incidence of Service Outlets

Mapping of the numbers of different service outlets shows that, unsurprisingly, there are significantly fewer service outlets in sparsely populated areas. For some specific services, (banks, cash points, job centres, supermarkets and dentists), the numbers in rural areas are notably fewer than would be expected to serve 20% of the English population (the rural proportion). This provides one suggestion of the way in which economies of scale and geography affect decisions on service location.

Change in Incidence of Service Outlets

Table 1 (below) shows the changes recorded in the numbers of service outlets between 2000 and 2006. There are some common trends across England as a whole. For example, both rural and urban areas have lost banks and building societies, but gained significant numbers of cash points.

Within rural England specifically, there has been a loss of just under 400 post offices and of over 300 petrol stations over this period, as well as a gain of over 1,300 cash points. It is worth noting that for post offices the reduction in the number

| Service | Less Sparse | | | | Sparse | | | | % Change | | |
	Urban >10K	Town and fringe	Village	Hamlet and isolated dwellings	Urban >10K	Town and fringe	Village	Hamlet and isolated dwellings	Rural total	Urban total	England total
Banks and building societies	-457	-44	-11	-4	-7	-7	1	-1	-4.0	-4.2	-4.2
Cashpoints	10,984	285	596	389	20	12	40	29	37.1	36.3	36.4
Principal GP surgeries	-47	0	18	3	0	0	0	1	1.7	-0.6	-0.3
Jobcentres	-108	-7	-2	-2	-2	0	0	0	-21.2	-11.3	-11.8
Petrol stations	-647	-128	-112	-56	-3	-6	-25	-13	-11.4	-11.6	-11.6
Post Offices	-2,196	31	-271	-108	-6	10	-30	-18	-7.5	-26.3	-19.1
Primary schools	-269	-15	-6	-7	1	-4	-6	0	-0.7	-2.2	-1.7
Secondary schools	-32	-6	-1	1	0	0	0	0	-1.1	-1.1	-1.1
Supermarkets	271	91	12	-5	0	7	-1	0	12.3	5.6	6.6

Table 1 - Change in number of service outlets, 2000-6

Source: Commission for Rural Communities, 2006. Rural Services Series. Analysis by Defra RSU.

of rural services has been notably less than that experienced in urban areas. This reflects both the impact of the Urban Reinvention Programme for Post Offices in urban areas and the (*then)* current government policy to provide financial support to the rural post office network.

These losses can be contrasted with the period before introduction of the Social Network Payment and commitment to prevent unavoidable post office closures; in the period between 1995 and 2001 England lost 1198 post offices, 65% of which were in rural areas.

Impact on Availability

Table 2 shows change in the 'availability'[10] of services to rural residents between 2000 and 2006 as mapped by the SOC series. This shows that in overall terms there has been little negative change (with the exception of job centres and petrol filling stations); this perhaps proves the importance of Government

presumptions against closure of village schools and Post Offices.

Future Prospects

As we look ahead beyond 2007 the expectation must be that service outlets will continue to disappear from rural communities. The introduction of 'internal markets' and competition between public service providers (especially in health and social care), the impact of a very tight Comprehensive Spending Review and the apparent changing priorities within Defra (away from Rural Affairs and in favour of environment) all point towards a context for further decline in local service delivery in rural, and particularly in sparse, rural areas.

The Government's proposals for the restructuring of the Post Office network are a clear example.

The DTi's consultation document states that Government's objective is to secure a national

Table 2 - Change in overall geographical availability of services for rural* residents, 2000-6				
	% of households		% change	
Service	2000	2006	2000-6	
Banks and building societies (4km)	63.9	63.7	-0.2	
Cashpoints (4km)	85.4	88.5	3.1	
Principal GP surgeries (4km)	79.5	79.7	0.2	
All GP surgeries (4km)†	-	84.3	-	
Jobcentres (8km)	59.2	55.8	-3.4	
Petrol stations (4km)	89.9	88.0	-1.9	
Post Offices (2km)	85.6	85.2	-0.4	
Primary schools (2km)	88.1	88.0	-0.1	
Secondary schools (4km)	62.8	62.5	-0.3	
Dentists (4km)†	-	71.4	-	
Supermarkets (4km)	67.2	69.9	2.7	

* Rural households are all households in areas defined as 'Hamlet and isolated dwellings', 'Village' and 'Town and fringe'.
† New in 2006.

Notes:
(i) The figures presented above do not necessarily correspond with those presented in previous State of the Countryside reports due to slight change in the methodology used.
(ii) Figures are based on the straight line distance between a household and the nearest service outlet of each type.

Source: Commission for Rural Communities, 2006. Rural Services Series. Analysis by Defra RSU.

[10] As measured by proximity of households to service points

Post Office network on a strong, stable footing to meet the challenges of today; a network that recognizes the important social role that post offices play in communities across the country. It recognizes (paragraph 4.1) that there is a need for a national Post Office network providing **reasonable access** to all communities, including those in remote areas.

'Post offices provide a valuable service for the vulnerable in our society (particularly the elderly, disabled and socially excluded) and it is important that the network continues to do so.'

In order to deliver such a network, DTi proposes to support a restructuring framework with up to 2500 closures 'within that framework'. Priority is to be given to protecting vulnerable communities in villages, towns and cities, however the consultation document goes on to state (paragraph 4.4) that a reduction in network size needs to be achieved, 'particularly among the *least used offices* and those making the biggest losses'. It is widely anticipated, based on commentary within the Consultation document, that the most vulnerable offices will be those serving smaller communities in rural areas.

'On average the 800 smallest rural post offices served just 16 people a week at a cost to the taxpayer, whatever the level of transaction, of £17 per visit. 1,600 branches served fewer than 20 customers a day and losing £8 for every transaction they made. More than half the rural network has fewer than 500 customers each week and more than 80% of the rural network is unprofitable to Post Office Ltd'

Rural communities that value their local services should therefore do all they can to support them. When, as is inevitable, the future sustainability of some of these services is questioned, the community that is aware of the challenges and prepared to find a way forward will be the one most likely to succeed.

About the Study

Aims and Objectives

This study aims to examine the consequences of change in rural communities that have seen a loss or a change in a key local service. How people have experienced, and adapted to, change in service provision is essential information for service planning and for agencies that support rural communities through change.

Through our ongoing work with rural communities, we believe that a change in the way a service is delivered can be as challenging to a community as a complete closure. In these circumstances, vulnerable groups are often hardest hit, with older people and young people at the top of that list.

We wished to find out about:-

- How and when the service changed
- How that made respondents feel
- Changes in patterns of use of the service
- Barriers to accessing replacement services
- Support received by the community
- The respondent's perception of the experience of change in the wider community

This study is a part of the wider Sustainable Rural Services project, which will run till March 2008. This study was completed in March 2007.

Funding and Management

The Sustainable Rural Services Project is funded by a grant from Defra's Rural Social and Community Programme. The project is managed by VAC and delivered by a combination of VAC staff and external consultants.

Methodology

Communities that had experienced a loss or reduction in service were identified through existing contacts and networks. Communities to be studied were selected to give:-

- A range of community types (hamlets, small villages, large villages, market towns)

- A range of rural services

- Both changes to and loss of a service

- A good geographical spread, with all Cumbrian districts represented.

- Service changes with both 'positive' and 'negative' outcomes

In the event, the communities approached were:- *(see table below)*

A semi-structured interview schedule was drawn up and agreed, and initial contact was made with people highlighted by VAC staff and colleagues. Desk and web-based research was used to provide full contact details and contact was made via telephone and/or e-mail.

Initial contact focused on explaining the project, and asking if that individual wanted to take part. Over 20 people were contacted in this way, and many discussed the issues within their community while declining to participate in a full interview. Their information has informed the results of this study.

Thirteen interviews were conducted with individuals from the eight targeted communities. Included in these thirteen are two e-mail responses, and one paper response. With telephone interviews, the interviewer aimed to record responses in the participant's own words. Responses were collated and entered into forms designed from the interview sheet, but there

Community	District	Service	Change
Blencarn	Eden	Post Office	Full-time PO closed. Home Service was offered but did not meet needs.
Blennerhasset	Allerdale	Post Office & Shop	Closure of shop. PO mobile service once a fortnight.
Brampton	Carlisle	Cottage hospital	Threatened closure of cottage hospital has now been averted.
Crosby	Allerdale	Post Office & Shop	PO & shop closure. PO re-started elsewhere in village, part-time.
Crosthwaite	S. Lakeland	Post Office & Shop	PO & shop closed. P/T PO now in pub. Community-run Exchange started.
Lindal-in-Furness	Barrow	Post Office & shop	Closure. PO in pub replacement later also closed.
Seascale	Copeland	GP Surgery	Reduction in available appointments and Saturday surgery.
Storth	S. Lakeland	Post Office & Shop	Post Office and shop closure. Community-run alternative started.

Findings

Overview

Loss or change of services generates strongly negative feelings. Although some interviewees talked in terms of loss being, "a shame," and it not being, "a good time," more used words like, "angry," "awful," and "nobody really gave a damn."

Conversely, community replacement of a lost service generates feelings like, "exciting and empowering," and interviewees talk in terms of, "positive action."

There is a perception of communities receiving very little outside help from agencies or councils, even when such help was offered. Communities feel that no-one cares, and feel 'let down' by the service provider.

People adapt. When talking to local people where a service had changed some time ago (3+ years) there was very variable recollection of the initial impact, and the edge of any negative feelings arising from the change had been dulled.

A time lag between one service closing and its replacement starting up is a critical success factor. Where a gap occurred, people made alternative arrangements, and are then less likely to change again when a local service is reinstated.

There appears to be a lack of support to owners of a withdrawing service. In one instance, closure led to a serious breakdown in the relationship between the owners and the community, and the owners considered moving out of the village. There was no support to prevent this, or to help the owners deal with its impact.

In one community, talking about a change which had occurred some time before led to concern over future changes. The study itself risked having a negative impact on this community, and interviews were ceased.

In most cases of post office or shop closure, the social impact appears to cause the most concern. However, a social meeting place does not have to be a post office, and Storth is an example of a community which has replaced a lost service with something different to meet this social need.

Closures resulted in a loss of choice and independence for older people. They have often become dependent on transport provided by others on a voluntary basis in order to access shopping and other services.

Although Post Office Limited were variously described as, "very helpful" and, "wasn't helpful at all," in many cases they were the only agency engaged in the process. There appears to be significant scope for earlier intervention from independent bodies to support the community, owners and parish councils, and help identify potential community solutions early enough to have a positive impact.

It is worth noting that not all closures were due to what people often perceive as malevolent outside intervention. In two instances, closures were due to malpractice by owner-operators, while a number of others were due to retirement.

Where people travel to other villages/towns to access post office services, they speak in terms of accessing the same **products** but not the same **services**. The social meeting place function is missing, and visiting another post office takes more time (queuing is mentioned), travel and effort for a service with, "no community spirit."

Findings by Community

On the following pages are the summaries of the responses to interviews, grouped by community. We have not sought to comment on outside factors, only to report the consequence of change as experienced by interviewees.

Community - Blencarn, Eden

Service - Post Office

Nature of Change

In November 2005 the full-time post office in Blencarn closed when the owner was offered a retirement package. As an alternative, the Home Service[11] option was offered, but there was no local take up.

Consequence of Change

This small village now has no post office. People travel to Langwathby 5 miles away if they have their own transport, or wait for the voluntary bus service twice a week which can take them to Penrith. It is understood that Langwathby has received increased business from a number of local closures, although it has not expanded its hours of work, or its number of staff. One user stated, "you have to queue for ages and there's no community spirit."

There was felt to be no flexibility in the approach of the Post Office. Only one alternative service was offered – the Home Service – which did not meet the needs of the many small businesses that used the post office in Blencarn. They would not provide an alternative post box that would take packets, could not divert the mobile post office to serve this community and did not appear to consider reducing the hours of the existing post office as an alternative to closure.

One local home business has closed as a result of the post office closure. The owner could not drive every day to have parcels weighed and posted and so ceased to trade. The number of small businesses and those working from home, already above the national average in Eden, is particularly high in this parish.

There is anger in the community that people are being forced to drive more at a time when the Government is encouraging people to use their cars less.

Feelings
- "Not easy at all."
- "Every time we tried . . . to compromise . . . it felt impossible."
- "I feel so much better for telling you all this."

Support
- "The Post Office lady . . . wasn't helpful at all, but she was very charming."
- "The Post Office put things in our way . . ."
- The Parish Council held a community meeting and tried to reach compromises with Post Office Ltd.

[11] Home Service is an alternative delivery option from Post Office Limited

Community - Blennerhasset, Allerdale

Service - Post Office and Shop

Nature of Change

In 2006, the post office, and then some months later the shop, closed. The post office was withdrawn from the facility due to service quality issues, and then an Environmental Health inspection forced the shop to close.

A mobile post office visits the village once a fortnight. Some mobile shops visit once a week, and did so before the shop closed.

Consequence of Change

The post office and shop is described as a, "big miss in the village," having been much used by older people.

A wider range of services are available in Aspatria, 4 miles away, and a mobile post office visits the village once a fortnight. There is no bus service in the village – people either drive to Aspatria, if they are able to, or rely on the kindness of friends, family and neighbours.

There are a number of people willing to take on a shop and post office, but the owners are not willing to sell the premises, and were not willing to sell the business before it closed.

It is understood that some local residents have left the village and moved to Aspatria, as they are unable to access necessary services in Blennerhasset. Social interaction in the village has declined considerably, in spite of there being a village school and pub. The suggestion is that these serve different target groups – the older people who used the shop have no connection with the school and would not choose to use the pub. Even with these local services, the loss of the post office and shop was a major blow.

Feelings

- "It felt like a real loss."
- "It's still a sore point."
- "Really disappointed."

Support

- The Parish Council were, and are, closely involved.
- No other apparent agency support, although there is still a strong local wish to re-start this service, potentially as a co-operative.

Community - Brampton, Carlisle

Service - Cottage Hospital

Nature of Change

At the time of planning this study, the cottage hospital in the market town of Brampton was under threat of closure. During the course of this study, a national consultant visited to evaluate the cottage hospitals suggested for closure, and on 5th Feb 07 it was announced that Brampton would not close.

Consequence of Change

There has been no change in service.

There is strong local feeling that the service should not close or be reduced, as many older people use it who would, "find it hard to go somewhere else."

Feelings

- "It shouldn't close."
- "It would be a loss to the community."

Support

-

Community - Crosby, Allerdale

Service - Post Office and Shop

Nature of Change

More than a year ago, the post office and shop in the village of Crosby closed. Crosby is a linear village on a hill, split by the A596. The post office was replaced by a part-time service (three days a week, 9.15am – 2.45pm) in another location. There is no longer a shop in Crosby.

Consequence of Change

Although an alternative post office service is in place, it is at the other end of the village, in a location that some users find inconvenient – "too old to walk far so the post office isn't really practical."

Shoppers without their own transport are reliant on local bus services and the good will of friends and relatives to visit shops in Maryport, although one respondent made the point that, "[my son] takes me to the shops in Maryport, but it's only when he's going, I don't get to choose." Some residents, particularly older people, therefore appear to have lost independence as a consequence of the change.

There was a gap between the shop/post office closing and the replacement service being in place. Both the owner and a past user of the old post office agree that this was key – previous customers made alternative arrangements, and did not change back when the new service opened.

The effect on the community was described as, "dramatic," with the key loss being a central focal point for social interaction.

Feelings
- "Nobody really gave a damn, I think."
- "People don't get involved."
- "Wasn't a problem really." [new owner]

Support
- The Post Office Ltd were described as, "really helpful," and, "very supportive,"by the owner of the replacement service. A past user explained that they, "helped a bit."
- There was some involvement by the Parish Council.

Community - **Crosthwaite**, South Lakeland

Service - Post Office and Shop

Nature of Change

In October 2005, the owners of the post office and shop in Crosthwaite retired. After a gap of 7 months, a limited (11am – 2.30pm) post office service was opened in the Punchbowl pub. Also in 2006, the Crosthwaite Exchange started, once a week in the local village hall, offering food, crafts and book stalls and chiropodists services. The Exchange is not a market – most stalls are run and stocked by volunteers, and some produce is available for a donation only.

Consequence of Change

The Exchange appears to be seen as a universally positive development. The Parish Council carried out a survey to find out what people valued most in the shop and post office. The 'meeting place' aspect of the service was most highly valued, and the Exchange project evolved from this.

Once again, the gap in service provision has reduced the probable market for replacement services. There is a perception that most people travel to access banking and shopping now.

Members of the community blamed the retiring owners for the loss of the service. There is a view that they should have stayed on to train up replacements, although no actual replacements are named. A three month notice period was given, but this is not a sufficient period to develop replacements. The owners felt that people were, "actually quite vitriolic in their complaints, they were very angry," and considered moving out of the village.

The post office in the Punchbowl serves some people, but there is concern that only local people who were there at the time are aware of the service, as there is a lack of signage. Those who made alternative arrangements during the gap in provision continue to travel to access post office services.

There is low awareness of Post Office Limited, agency or Parish Council help, although the PC arranged a public meeting and survey, and the new post office could not have been established without help from Post Office Limited.

Feelings
- "Sad, but life moves on."
- "It was not a good time."
- "Shame, really."
- "The Crosthwaite Exchange is wonderful."
- "Sad at the time, but OK now."

Support
- Parish Council were, "very understanding and they did a survey for local people."

Community - Lindal-in-Furness, Barrow

Service - Post Office and Shop

Nature of Change
More than 4 years ago, the post office service moved from the shop to a local pub. It subsequently closed completely, and the shop closed shortly afterward.

Consequence of Change
People now either drive or use a regular bus service to travel to Dalton, Barrow or Ulverston.

The chief awareness of loss is again connected to the social aspect of the service. Users, "don't get to chat to people and find out how they are." This can sound trivial, but can be part of an important social support network.

There is a sense that the community is turning into a commuter village with new people only moving in if they have a car.

Feelings
- "Awful – not having a shop is very difficult."
- "It's gone and there's nothing to replace it."

Support
- There was a talk of a mobile service, "but nothing seemed to happen."
- The Parish Council, "talked about it a bit."

Community - Seascale, Copeland

Service - Doctor's surgery

Nature of Change

The surgery reduced its afternoon sessions by 30 minutes and stopped the Saturday morning surgery. This change happened approximately two years ago.

Consequence of Change

People appear to have adapted to the change in service, although there is still a high level of fear about potential closure of the surgery. Initial enquiries caused concern in the community that further service change might be imminent, and further interviews were not pursued.
Emergency cover appears poor in the area (an interviewee reported waiting times of several hours for an ambulance in cases of heart attack, for patients who later died) and weekend cover is considered inadequate.

Feelings

- "Angry at the national service."
- Users have, "made do," stating that, "that's how it will work in a rural area."

Support

-

Community - Storth, South Lakeland

Service - Post Office and Shop

Nature of Change
Three years ago, Storth's shop and post office changed from being privately owned to being a community owned and managed social enterprise.

Consequence of Change
Although there is still some anger at, "authorities" for allowing the facility to close, there is great support for the current service. There is a sense that people make more effort to use the community-run service than they did the previous shop and post office. Interviewees state that, "more people are involved," and recognise the importance of the, "nucleus of a team [that] drove Storth along."
There are some concerns that restricted opening hours encourage some people to travel to neighbouring post offices.
Support from the Co-Operative movement, VAC and the Parish Council is highly valued where it is known. But two out of three respondents were not aware of this support having occurred.
There is obvious excitement at the development and pride in the service the community runs.
"The Government taking services away from the Post Office doesn't help us."

Feelings
- "Angry that the authorities were prepared to allow it to close."
- "Very exciting and empowering."
- "The village was taking such positive action."

Support
- "VAC and the Co-op were very supportive."
- The Parish Council, "were involved".

The Sustainable Rural Services Project – Year Two

This study is only one element of the Sustainable Rural Services Project, reflecting the work undertaken in Year One.

In Year Two we will be:

- Assembling a **Guidance Pack**, by collating existing information from a wide variety of support agencies. This will be aimed at communities facing service change or loss.

- Undertaking an **Action Research Project** testing the Guidance Pack with two focus groups drawn from the sample used in this study, and two new communities facing service change or loss. We will seek feedback on the applicability of the Guidance Pack, and record how useful it was to the communities it aims to help.

- Producing an **Advice Sheet** for service providers aiming to change or remove a service from a rural community. The Sheet will suggest ways to maximise the benefit of consultation, communicate effectively, and deal with community expectations. It will also provide links to other sources of help.

- Holding a **Conference** – **From Rhetoric to Reality: Supporting Rural Services** - to present the findings of this Study, and the Project's further research, and raise awareness of the impact of service change or loss.

- Producing a **Final Report** of the Project, which will be available by the end of March 2008.

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