



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

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

Rural services such as shops, post offices, doctor's surgeries, cottage hospitals, petrol stations and many other important facilities 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 Third Sector services.

The Sustainable Rural Services project 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 guidance that is of use to communities, local authorities and service providers.
- Raise awareness of service loss, rural equity* and social exclusion†.

This Guidance has been produced by VAC as a part of the Sustainable Rural Services project which is funded by Defra through the Rural Social and Community Programme.

* Rural Equity relates to the careful management of strategies, policies and funding so that people living in rural areas can experience fair access to services and facilities.

† Social Exclusion is a short hand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low income, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown. Those who experience social exclusion are, for whatever reason, prevented from participating in or benefiting from those things most people can take for granted.

To find out more about the impact that the loss of or a reduction in a service may have on people in rural communities, please read, "A Loss for Everyone – The Consequences of Service Withdrawal in Cumbrian Rural Communities." This is the Sustainable Rural Services study report on which our recommendations have been based, and is produced by VAC.

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SUSTAINABLE RURAL SERVICES PROJECT

LOCAL SERVICES UNDER THREAT

This Guidance is for Service Providers and Communities who are managing change, reduction or loss of a Rural Service



Guidance to publicly funded Service Providers

Are you planning to change, reduce or remove a service in a rural community? This Guidance aims to suggest ways in which you can minimise the negative impact on communities, and help communicate the change, and the reasons for it, to the people it will affect. Our research shows that a change in the way a service is delivered can be as damaging to communities as a total loss, especially if the change makes the service less accessible, so deserves equal consideration.

The key advice is to **work with local councillors at all levels – parish, district and county**. They are the elected representatives of communities and have a responsibility to represent the interests of local people. Keep them informed of your plans and your reasons, and ask them to discuss the issue with local people.

Things to Consider

Identify Rural Proofing arrangements

Rural Proofing is the process of testing policies and decisions to ensure that impacts on rural areas are fully considered. Find out what policies cover your work, and if decisions have been Rural Proofed. Cumbria County Council has more information on Rural Proofing on their Rural Matters pages:
www.cumbria.gov.uk/ruralmatters/default.asp

Are you consulting or informing?

Nothing is more frustrating for communities than to be asked how they would like to influence something that is already a fait accompli. Be clear about whether you are consulting (asking people's views – correctly done *before* a decision is reached) or informing them of something that has already been decided.

Proper consultation takes 3-6 months

True consultation takes time. But there is much you can do even if you have a tight timescale.

- If you have 4 weeks: Talk to local Councillors.
- If you have six weeks: Talk to Councillors and liaise with the local parish council and Neighbourhood Forum.
- If you have 2 months: Talk to local Councillors, circulate information, hold an open meeting and collect feedback.

Cumbria County Council has a useful consultation toolkit online at <http://www.cumbria.gov.uk/communityinformation/ce/default.asp>.

Use a community profile

Find out from local councils how the community is made up. Are there a greater than average proportion of older people? Are income levels lower than neighbouring areas? Understanding the community you are affecting will help in recognising the impact of your plans.

Think about the vulnerable people you will affect

Key vulnerable groups such as older people, younger people, parents with young children, those without their own transport and people with disabilities will all experience a reduction in service differently. For example,

- older people often rely on offers of lifts from friends and relatives when services in their local village close, so experience a real reduction in their independence;
- parents with young children can become isolated when there are few local facilities and services.

Consider whether such impacts are acceptable in the context of your organisation's policies, and those of others. Understanding how your plans will affect different members of the community is essential.

Consider the impact on other services

The loss of one service can have a serious impact on other services in the same community, especially where they are co-located. Village shops struggle to survive if post offices services are withdrawn from them, for example. You may need to look beyond your own plans and think of the broader consequences in terms of a reduction in more than one service.

What does the Community Plan say?

Many parishes and communities in Cumbria have completed Community or Parish Plans. These documents are a statement of what local people value in their community and what actions they feel need to be taken to maintain them. Is there a local Community or Parish Plan? What does it say about the service you are changing?

Use the 'Compact'

There is a 'Compact' between local government and the Third Sector, setting minimum standards for consultation and partnership working. There may be other agreements and protocols which affect your work – review relevant consultation policies and agreements, and ensure you adhere to them.

Think outside the box

Don't look at your particular service challenge in isolation. Changes in the way the service is delivered in neighbouring communities may have impacts on capacity which allow additional delivery to the community you are dealing with. Consider creating links with other services and using a collaborative approach with other providers. In this way, you can turn a change in the way your service is delivered into a positive development.

Actions to Take

Create a timeline

Plan the key stages in the process, record external deadlines, such as the requirements of compact compliance, and specify internal deadlines. This will help to identify where activity like Rural Proofing or consultation will fit.

Test your strategy

If you compare your strategic plan for rural services against other strategic documents, does it fit? Are your actions aligned with, or contrary to policies and commitments in, for example, the Regional Rural Delivery Framework, the Local Area Agreement for Cumbria and local Community Strategies? If so, you may need to review your plans.

Look at other delivery opportunities

You can mitigate impacts by looking at other delivery opportunities that your organisation is involved in. Do you have a rural outreach service that can be augmented to cover a community where a located service is being withdrawn? Can you expand a voluntary car scheme to help a community cope with the loss of a bus service?

Can you maintain services by working with another provider or Third Sector* partner.

Facilitate a community response

Consider working with partners, especially those from the Third Sector, to access community views and draw together a community response to your strategy. The creativity and adaptability in many communities may surprise you.

Explain and be transparent

If people understand the drivers behind the changes, they are often better able to respond to consultation, and cope with change. Explain to the community *what* is going to happen, *when*, and most importantly *why*.

Understand the role customers and partners can play to help sustain the service

There are many examples of service providers joining forces with local people to maintain services or change the way that they are accessed. Consider how local groups might be able to help organise alternative provision.

*The Third Sector (or Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector) is made up of organisations that are not fully in the public or private sector, such as voluntary organisations and community groups. VAC, Age Concern and the Cumbria Youth Alliance are examples of Third Sector organisations.

Local Services Under Threat

– Guidance for Communities –

The key advice is to work with local councillors at all levels – parish, district and county. They are your elected representatives and have a duty to represent the interests of local people. Keep them informed of your concerns and your plans, and ask them to convey your views to service providers.

Things to think about!

Make sure you know what is really happening

Find out direct from service providers what their plans are, and why. Check local people's assumptions and collect *fact* rather than *rumours*

Why does the change matter and to whom?

Who are the people who will be affected by this? What affect will the change have on the community as a whole?

Community Solutions

Note that setting up a community-run replacement for a service can take a great deal of time, perhaps as much as 2 years and involves lots of hard work. This can be a viable option, but go into it with your eyes open!

Who makes the decision?

Find out where the decisions are ultimately made, and who is responsible. Who advises the decision makers? Collect their contact details and share them with others

Understand the issues

Things are rarely cut and dried – find out the context of the proposed changes, and the policies that are driving them. Be clear about the impact of the change

Get advice

There are organisations who can advise you on how to run a campaign and getting your message across. It's important to invest a little time in planning how you wish to proceed, and with help, you can do this in an informed way

Use it before you lose it!

Prevent services from hitting difficulties by using them regularly and encouraging others to do the same. Remind people to support local services on notice boards and in newsletters

Ask for help

Local councils and support organisations like VAC can provide direct help in some circumstances. They can help you plan open meetings, contact local people and circulate information. Ask around, and see what is on offer

Tell the real story

Get information out and in circulation in the community that presents the facts in easy to understand, plain language. Keep information up to date, and use notice boards and newsletters to reach everyone

Things to do!

Learn from others

Don't reinvent the wheel! Other communities will have been through this before, and their experiences might be helpful to you too

Use your councillors

Speak directly to your local councillors – county, district and parish – and find out how they can help. It is their job to represent community views, so use them in every way you can!

Don't lay blame

Respectful conversations get far more done than mud-slinging – although the issue is important, and people are often anxious and frustrated, resist the urge to argue amongst yourselves and blame each other

Visit the Local Services Under Threat pages on the VAC website for more help
www.ruralcumbria.org.uk



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