



PRESS RELEASE:

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Future for Rural Services

THE real impact of cutting services to rural communities will be the focus of a major conference in Cumbria this month.

“From Rhetoric to Reality: A Future for Rural Services?” has been organised by Voluntary Action Cumbria, which will launch its Guide for communities facing cuts and those running services at the event.

Chaired by the government’s Rural Advocate, Dr. Steward Burgess, the conference will look at the issue of rural services from both residents’ and providers’ view points, at Melmerby Village Hall on November 28.

Voluntary Action Cumbria have been working on the initiative for more than 18 months, talking to people in isolated areas of Cumbria, where services have been cut in recent months.

Leader of the project, Anna Scamans said: “Our aim was to look at what really happens to rural people when their community loses their Post Office, doctor’s surgery, petrol station, library or bus service for example. There has been much speculation about the impacts and our research shows the effects can be very complex. They affect people’s quality of life, which is of great importance.

“We were keen not to make assumptions. We discovered that it’s not always the service itself that is valued. For example, in the case of the closure of a rural post office it may not be the inability to buy a stamp or post a parcel that has the most impact on people, but the loss of social interaction that the post office provided.

“Finding out the real story, what really happens to the community, is information which is very valuable when decisions about the future of services are being discussed.

“We have looked not only at the loss of services, but also at the impacts that occur when services are changed, such as a reduction in opening hours or a time change for a bus service. We have found that these can be as damaging as losing the service completely.

“We have been out to local communities, and met the people who have been affected by major changes to their services. Their views have helped us to create a Guide which lays out the debate from both the service providers and users point of view. The aim of this is for those involved to see the issue from each side, and enable them to work together to find a solution.

“We have been testing the Guide and will be bringing back the results to the conference.”

The conference will give local, rural communities the opportunity to celebrate their successes, and provide positive and challenging stories which those running rural services can use when planning for the future. It will bring together representatives of communities fighting to save their local services and representatives of the service providers. As well as hearing about community successes and the research conclusions, workshops will provide an opportunity for participants to consider new solutions to service problems.

Anna added: “It is not all about bad news, and we will be focusing on how those who provide the services can adapt and work with the communities to find solutions.”

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Photo:

Rural Advocate, Dr Stewart Burgess who will be chairing the Cumbrian conference on rural services

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