



Cumbria Rural Forum – Rural Briefing

In February 2007, the Cumbria Rural Forum met to discuss rural services and the future of rural Post Offices. We looked at the concept of delivering services through 'Key Service Centres', and how this affects rural Cumbrians. The Forum also considered the DTI's consultation on the future of the Post Office Network. By the end of the meeting we wanted to know how people viewed the service centre approach, and to have enough information for a Forum response to the Post Office Consultation.

Rural Services

Where are we now?

A rural service is something that helps rural communities meet their everyday needs. People often think of shops and post offices, doctors and pubs, but the term also covers schools, transport, banking, petrol stations, advice and support services and many more.

Service provision is a complex, overlapping mosaic that is hard to map out. Services evolve out of need and opportunity, which makes service planning difficult. Important services are delivered by private businesses, social enterprises, Government-funded agencies, and by charities and voluntary groups – the latter often plugging gaps in that complex mosaic.

Problems and Policies

It costs too much to deliver services directly to rural people in smaller communities. Schools, shops and pubs close, and people travel further to get the services they need. As they travel more, they are more likely to learn, shop, drink and eat in larger villages and towns, which makes local services less likely to survive.

To contain the rising costs of service delivery, many policies now prioritise offering services in fewer locations – or Key Service Centres (KSCs). Planning policies restrict new developments to these locations because regional and national policies say they have to. In Cumbria, there are 25 KSCs, mostly market towns such as Brampton, Wigton, Cleator Moor, Appleby or Ulverston.

This relocation has the greatest effect on people who have no transport, and so have no other way to get to services. Vulnerable people like young mothers, people with health problems, older people and younger people are most likely to suffer – becoming even more vulnerable. Delivering services in this way also appears to

be less fair, as getting to services costs rural people more than those living in towns. This runs against the principles of 'Rural Proofing' which aims to check that policies are treating rural dwellers fairly.

Now, and in the future, rural communities are being asked to show that they are sustainable¹ in social, economic and environmental terms. This, and the need to care for vulnerable people, demands greater flexibility and more creativity in delivering rural services. But the Key Service Centre approach seems to offer less services, delivered less fairly, and undermines the ability of rural communities to sustain themselves.

~ Bright Ideas ~

Creative service delivery in the 21st Century doesn't have to be Key Service Centre based. The **Library Service** in Cumbria has had to become a master of change, and is pioneering ways to deliver a surprisingly wide range of services to as many people as possible. There are 1.4 million items to choose from, available from 53 libraries and an increasing range of other outlets. **Solutions and services** include:-

- Books on Prescription (self-help books prescribed by GPs)
- Mobile Libraries
- Library Links (mini, self-service libraries in shops and community locations)
- Informal learning
- Training courses
- A safe place to sit, read and meet others
- Free access to online services
- Home delivery

The Library Service is using a flexible approach and multi-partnership working to deliver their services to as many people as possible. To find out more, visit <http://www.cumbria.gov.uk/libraries/>.

¹ See definition overleaf.

VAC works with people and communities to improve the quality of life in Rural Cumbria

Post Offices

The Big Picture

Rural post offices don't make money. The Government has long accepted that rural post offices have a social role – they are a place for people to meet, talk and look after each other in informal ways. And for some years, the Government has been subsidising the rural post office network at a cost of approximately £150 million a year. This Rural Network Payment will continue till 2011, but after then the money will run out. Changes will have to be made.

Change starts now. It is likely that 2,500 post offices (18% of a national network of 14,300) will have to close, and Post Office Limited is keen to start this ball rolling as soon as possible. The DTI launched a consultation on the future of the post office network in December 2006.

The Local Picture

There are 221 post offices in Cumbria. Of these, 166 are serving rural communities. On average, a Cumbrian rural post office serves 1540 people, while a Cumbrian urban post office serves 4400. If 18% of Cumbria's post offices were to close, we would lose around 40. If the least financially viable branches were to close first, all of those 40 would be in rural areas.

Four out of five rural post offices are run with another service like a shop. In these cases, closing the post office threatens the other business. Most people who use rural post offices are also particularly vulnerable – people who struggle to get to services elsewhere.

(The deadline for the Post Office consultation has now passed, but details can still be found at <http://www.dti.gov.uk/consultations/page36024.html>. The Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) response to the consultation is at <http://www.acre.org.uk/DOCUMENTS/Consultations/ACRE%20PO%20response.pdf>.)

The Post Office Consultation

The Cumbria Rural Forum Response

Working from the views of members, the Forum has compiled a response to the consultation. For full a copy of the Cumbria Rural Forum response, please contact VAC (details below).

Our key points about the consultation were:-

- It does not consider the impact of closures on other businesses.
- It fails to take into account the environmental impact of increased travel.
- It ignores the impact of closures on tourism businesses and visitors.
- Closures will have most negative effects in rural communities without access to transport, and where road conditions and distance make travelling difficult.
- Local people should be involved in decisions over closures and changes in service.
- When the Government response to Climate Change is requiring people to travel less, closures will force people to travel more.
- Where rural communities already have an unfair lack of choice in accessing services, closures will reduce choice even further.
- Decisions on necessary closures should look at the time it takes to travel to an alternative, not on how far away that alternative is.
- Services which have been withdrawn (such as bill payments) should be given back.
- Post offices could combine with other services such as doctor's surgeries, mobile libraries, etc, to maintain a local service.
- Good decisions about the future of post offices can only be made at the local level.
- Special consideration must be given to vulnerable people.
- Many communities don't have the time or expertise to take a post office on, and need long term support to achieve this.

For further details about the Cumbria Rural Forum, contact Ruth Evans at VAC on 01768 869510 or e-mail ruth.evans@ruralcumbria.org.uk. The Cumbria Rural Forum pages of the VAC website can be found at www.ruralcumbria.org.uk/cumbriaruralforum.html.

The 21st Century Village

What might a sustainable rural community look like in 2049? Are rural communities sustainable? How might they be sustainable in the future? Help us answer these questions at the next meeting of the Forum during **National 21st Century Village Week**, starting 5th July 2007.

Sustainability – Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

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