

## Land Use and Rural Policy

# Service Priority, Accessibility and Quality in Rural Scotland

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## Introduction

In April 2005, the Scottish Executive commissioned a study to inform the dialogue between itself and Community Planning Partners in the setting of local targets for improving access to and quality of key services in remote and disadvantaged parts of rural Scotland (Rural Service Priority Areas or RSPAs). The study was conducted by Accent Marketing & Research and included a review of existing local research and consultation findings, and qualitative focus group research. It sought to explore and identify rural communities' own priorities for service improvement.

## Main Findings

- The qualitative focus group findings suggest a high level of consistency of priority issues between communities including: public transport, roads maintenance, health, emergency services, telecommunications, utilities, post offices and shops, health, emergency services, refuse collection and recycling and utilities.
- These findings reflect to a large extent the findings of local research and consultation (including large scale survey) exercises, though communities involved in these placed greater emphasis on housing, education, training, leisure, crime, job creation and the needs of the elderly and young people and less on telecommunications, emergency services and the utilities.
- However there are some distinct local variations as well as differences by social group, age and degree of remoteness. Policy responses need to be sensitive to these differences.
- A broad range of services have been identified as needing to be improved and these are provided by both the public and private sectors (though interestingly not to any great extent by voluntary groups).
- The research identified a need for improvements in two-way communication between rural communities, service providers and policy makers so that needs for service improvements can be passed on and progress in implementing them provided.
- The Scottish Executive has begun to discuss the implications of this research with Community Planning Partnerships. CPPs are already seeking to address some of the issues raised by it. It is important therefore that future efforts to improve access to and quality of services recognise the work already undertaken to identify and act upon community needs.

## Background to the study

The Scottish Executive's 'Closing the Opportunity Gap' social justice strategy includes a commitment to improving access to high quality services for the most disadvantaged groups and individuals in rural communities as a means of enhancing quality of life and access to opportunity. The Executive has set a target for 2008 to achieve improvements in accessibility and quality for key services agreed with Community Planning Partners in the most remote and disadvantaged communities (Rural Service Priority Areas). This research was commissioned to inform the discussion between the Scottish Executive and Community Planning Partners in the process of agreeing local targets.

The objectives of the research were to identify and explore the priorities of people living in rural areas regarding key services for them and their community and to identify how access to and quality of these services might be improved. In addition, the study also sought ideas from rural residents on innovative ways of improving service delivery as well as their views on communicating needs to policy makers.

## Research methods

This study is based on a literature review to source, assess and summarise existing relevant information from previous research and consultation in these areas. This was followed by a programme of 13 qualitative focus group discussions conducted across RSPAs. The groups sought to obtain the 10 most important service priorities for improvement for each community, employing specialised techniques to attain a realistic set of expectations for improvements in these areas.

## Defining service access & quality

Various definitions of access and quality were suggested by the focus group participants.

Access was defined as: travel time, physical accessibility, opening hours, services being brought in to a region, response time, level of personal contact, regularity/frequency of service provision, and service integration.

Quality was defined as: acceptable costs, quality of staff, time allocated to people, services tailored to community needs, cleanliness of premises, access and the range of a service (i.e. the extent of the service offered).

Little need for (further) *innovative* approaches to improving service delivery in order to promote accessibility and quality was identified within the group discussions. The literature review, however, found numerous existing examples of means of improving access to services.

## Service improvement priorities

The local literature review found many examples of research and consultation conducted in rural Scotland. Access was found to be a key issue and a range of local initiatives have already been implemented to bring about improvements. Gaining or improving access was a major theme, particularly on accessing public transport, ferry services, community transport schemes, transport to health care appointments and fuel costs.

Often the desire was simply to secure or maintain current levels of such services as: retail, primary schools, GP services, services to young people, childcare and community halls.

On quality, there were generally high levels of satisfaction with rural services. There were specific instances of dissatisfaction, with differences in perceptions according to social group (the elderly typically being more satisfied than other groups for example) and geographic location (e.g. those in smaller remote locations without a car often less satisfied).

Services consistently cited as key priority areas for improvement were: affordable housing, sports/leisure generally, leisure/recreation for young people, local job opportunities, support for local businesses, drug and alcohol abuse and access to health services.

The group discussions took a broader view than most of the previous research. The local research and consultation review tended to focus on single pre-defined service themes and/or on the views of particular groups of people. The aim of the focus groups was to encourage communities to identify service improvement priorities themselves and these could include *any* service.

The group discussions revealed that, although there were local issues raised in terms of service priorities, access and quality in each of the locations, there was a broad consensus across all regions as to what the priority quality and access issues were. These comprised:

- access to **public transport** (e.g. integration of different services) and rising costs of **private transport** (e.g. lack of petrol stations)

- access to **health centres, GPs and emergency services** (e.g. limited opening hours, withdrawal of other services)
- access to **other emergency services** (e.g. longer travel times for the fire service)
- access to **refuse collection and recycling** (e.g. frequency), poor quality (e.g. badly communicated)
- access to **post offices and retail shops** (e.g. shops closing, limited choice, high travel times as a result, loss of community centre)
- quality of **road maintenance** and perceived short-termist view on maintenance (e.g. 'patching up', heavy lorries)
- access to and quality of **communication services** (e.g. poor reception of mobiles, television and broadband access)
- access to and quality of **utilities, water and energy** (e.g. poor quality of product, belief that rural locations were unimportant).

Access to, and quality of, **housing** was also a concern in a sizeable minority of the communities consulted **and leisure, recreation and education** were also widely discussed but less so than the other issues.

Many of the issues identified in the review were consistent with the group discussions, in particular those relating to transportation, health, retailing waste management. Youth issues and the needs of the elderly, education and training, housing and leisure featured in the literature but were not high amongst the priorities of the groups. Conversely, the groups felt that emergency services, telecommunications and utilities were important, but there was little evidence of these themes being explored in previous research and consultations.

## Channels of communication

The literature review found that Community Planning Partners are increasingly seeking to involve communities in identifying the key services they require and where to locate and deliver them. A wide range of methods, involving face-to-face, postal, telephone or electronic contact are used to involve and consult the public on issues of importance to them.

In some of the focus groups, there was recognition of the amount of consultation and research being undertaken.

However, there was a belief amongst some of the groups that they had never been so consulted yet seen so few results. Some felt that their MPs, local councils and the Scottish Executive should focus on 'getting the job done' rather than discussing what needs to be done. However, the groups in other areas felt they had never been communicated with and that better two-way communication was essential.

Many requested a direct communication channel to the Scottish Executive. It was felt that direct access to MSPs and MPs was appealing yet underused due to the shortness of time available. Some requested more communication on the role and effectiveness of Community Councils and possible training for councillors to be more receptive to communication within the community.

## Conclusions

The research identified a wide range of issues both common to remote rural communities and specific to certain regions and groups and has identified the key priority services and how access to and/or quality of these should be improved to meet expectations. Policy responses will need to be sensitive to addressing the local variations identified.

There are differences of emphasis between the literature review findings and the groups on priority issues for improvement. When presented with a blank canvas, it is interesting that the groups gave greater prominence to issues relating to emergency services, telecommunications and utilities. Conversely they made very few mentions of crime and job creation, which feature strongly in previous work.

Many of the service issues identified concerned services that are provided by both the public and private sectors, though interestingly, voluntary sector provision did not feature in the findings of the groups. Improvements can be brought about by the co-ordinated effort of service providers and policy makers including Community Planning Partners the Scottish Executive and private sector providers.

Given the sometimes negative views expressed about communications between communities, service providers and policy makers, the research has highlighted the importance of feeding back the findings of research and consultation and the actions arising from them to the communities consulted. This can help ensure the communities feel they have been listened to and promote the value of outcome orientated research.

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