



## Summary of Findings

# Rural Proofing and Best Practice in Neighbourhood Renewal



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### Introduction

Working with West Cornwall Together, this project aimed to:

- Review the issues involved in tackling rural deprivation, and their implications for local strategies for Neighbourhood Renewal in West Cornwall.
- Investigate examples of Best Practice in meeting the needs of less well-off people living in rural areas.
- Consider the effectiveness of Neighbourhood Renewal in meeting the needs of rural communities.
- Provide general recommendations for improving the effectiveness of rural regeneration initiatives.

The research comprised two phases:

- **Phase One:** Overview of existing programmes, policies, and targets - based upon documentary analysis, project data and a survey of NRF supported projects.
- **Phase Two:** Lessons from Best Practice in rural regeneration and policy implications - based upon case study research with a range of local NRF and Community Fund supported projects in West Cornwall.

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### Phase One

A survey of NRF-supported projects was undertaken with a view to ascertaining project managers' views about the challenges facing WCLSP in the delivery of Neighbourhood

Renewal in rural areas. The postal questionnaire was sent to all active and completed NRF-supported projects. Of the 64 projects contacted, 47 (73%) returned the completed questionnaire.

### 1. Social, Economic and Cultural Issues

Respondents' perceptions of the main problems facing rural areas, and especially for less well-off people living in rural areas, related primarily to:

- **Improving transport provision.** Need for more accessible, affordable, reliable public transport. Central to effective delivery of a wide range of services, and to the broader participation of 'excluded' groups.
- **Providing better access to local services.** Need for greater flexibility and coordination in the use of existing local facilities, better access to information and advice, and better outreach and mobile services for vulnerable groups.
- **Encouraging employment and economic development.** Need for more flexible rural planning and development policies, more incentives for rural businesses, and action to raise wage levels in rural areas.
- **Addressing housing deprivation.** Need for more truly affordable rural housing provision through greater provision of social housing and reform of Council Tax legislation.

- **Focusing on Health and Wellbeing.** The health effects of isolation and lack of social contact can be especially severe in rural areas emphasising the need for better provision of mobile and outreach services.
- **Improving education and skills provision.** Need for more local skills and knowledge-related outreach services, a community focus in the approach of local rural schools, and better financial support for education and training.
- **Changing attitudes and raising awareness.** Lack of personal confidence, self-belief and aspirations. Stigmatisation of rural poverty coupled with traditions of self-reliance. Lack of awareness of opportunities available. Parochialism and insularity of some rural communities.

## 2. The Process of Rural Regeneration

Respondents' perceptions of the principle challenges in the development of better rural anti-poverty initiatives are summarised below:

- **Better public service funding.** Lack of integration in service delivery. Additional premium involved in rural service delivery. Under-funding and lack of investment in remoter areas.
- **Involving local communities.** Finding out the views of ordinary people. Involving local people in decision-making. Outreach with client groups to foster engagement.
- **Addressing budget constraints.** Tight delivery timescales. Over-stretched local services. Need for long-term sustainability. Better mainstreaming of existing initiatives.
- **Developing local capacity.** Absence of community infrastructure in rural areas. Shortage of local volunteers and know-how, skills and experience. Need for long-term community development work in rural areas.
- **Making partnership working a reality.** Better co-ordination of services. Overcoming institutional boundaries and hierarchies of power. Better use of existing informal community networks.
- **Better targeting of resources.** Need to move away from top-down approach to the targeting of resources and monitoring of progress. Importance of enabling communities to identify their own needs.

## *Phase Two*

### 1. Funding Mechanisms

- **Flexibility, lack of bureaucracy and speed of response** of Community Chest/Community Empowerment Fund are crucial for development of small rural projects.
- **The significance of locally based community development workers** who can assist small isolated groups to access resources in partnership with Community Chest/Empowerment Fund cannot be overestimated.
- **The flexibility of NRF funding** allows other work to be built on and gaps to be filled.
- **The availability of research, policy and funding expertise** makes a significant impact for small and intermediate sized organisations. However this expertise is not consistently available, or may involve very high costs in terms of worker time for smaller organisations.
- **Forums and networks** such as West Cornwall Community Network can also provide crucial support to small groups.
- **Combinations of skills.** Some smaller organisations are fortunate to have workers who can combine research and entrepreneurial skills with good community development practice.

### *Areas for Development:*

- **Gaps for smaller organisations.** There is often a gap for smaller/ intermediate organisations who cannot put so much time into fundraising. The Community Chest workers provide valuable support but may be spread too thinly in some areas.
- **Continuity of community work support.** Community development workers are important as a continuing (if changing) source of support for smaller groups, otherwise momentum and funding opportunities may be lost.
- **The high relative costs** of funding services and projects for dispersed rural populations in order to provide equal access to services means that coordination of activities is important - but cannot obviate higher relative costs.
- **Conflicting timescales and delays** to the start of some projects undermine positive development work, especially where there are complicated partnerships within communities.
- **Sustainability** is an issue that is experienced differently by different projects, depending on the availability of core funding, or the fit with current core targets and priorities. The future of some successful projects is at risk.
- **Conservation** and opposed to rebuilding work had some difficulty attracting funds.

## **2. Exchange and inter-agency work.**

There is an additional premium on cooperation between agencies and projects in rural areas:

- Very local cooperation and networks
- Interagency work between agencies, projects and services
- Regional/county wide partnerships delivering services in cooperation with local communities

- Links and mutual learning with similar projects in other parts of England
- Links, sharing of lessons, and use of resources from outside the UK
- However, complicated partnerships can be more sensitive to funding delays

## **3. Bottom up community based development**

- **Significance of personal engagement.** In rural areas there is additional value in individual engagement to assist people and groups to increase confidence, skills and participation. Each community is different and it is important to be responsive to these differences. Projects and programmes need to adapt to local conditions.
- **Networks in the community and voluntary sectors.** A strength of West Cornwall in supporting local groups and interchange is the strong development of community networks, including those now come together in West Cornwall Community Network.
- **Community dynamics, difference and visibility.** Development work at local level needs to be sensitive to the dynamics of communities. All communities have differences and divisions, but in small rural communities these can be more visible and less easy to avoid. There is evidence of a great deal of energetic local activity, community spirit and cooperation. However historic and current divisions based on housing tenure, income, and local connections persist and have to be worked with by activists and community workers.
- **Cornish connections.** Another important dimension of community difference is length of connection with Cornwall. Activists come from across the spectrum in terms of Cornish connections. A willingness to engage with the community

on equal terms is crucial and can lead to inclusive community initiatives.

- **Development work with organisations and services.** Development work is also important for organisations and professionals in rural areas. They also need a chance to engage fully with local issues and planning.

#### 4. Service provision in the West Cornish context

Services and projects need to adapt to respond to rural disadvantage. Some of the specific issues to emerge are:

- **High relative costs** of provision in rural areas.
- **Transport costs** are very important to many projects.
- **Rural children** can have very limited experiences with few trips away from their area.
- **Small numbers of young people** in some villages pose particular difficulties for effective local provision and leave them without youth services.
- **Older people** can be particularly isolated in rural areas
- **Personal and community engagement.** Working in more isolated rural areas enhances the premium on personal and community engagement and adaptation to local conditions in order to deliver services successfully.
- **Geographical peripherality.** West Cornwall is sometimes seen as the 'end of the line' for people from elsewhere who hope to find solutions to their problems (*eg.* domestic violence). This has implications for local health, education and social services.

#### 5. Diversity and inclusion

- **Cornish people** themselves can feel excluded and projects can assist people to take pride in Cornish identity, history and culture.
- **Inclusion for minority groups.** Specific minority groups (*eg.* Travellers) need to be given further attention within mainstream services and projects.
- **Gender issues** permeate service provision in Cornwall as elsewhere. Gender interacts with age, poverty and exclusion to create particular pressures for women and girls.
- **Promoting disability access,** in Cornwall as elsewhere, is a statutory requirement. However, accessibility provision strains small project budgets.

#### 6. Skills, leadership and commitment

- **Individual and professional commitment, lobbying, vision and skills** have added value in rural areas to change practices and attitudes, and generate links, networks and opportunities.
- **Importance of advocacy.** The contribution of professional and worker activism in breaking down barriers needs to be given a clearer place in regeneration. In some situations the voice of frontline workers may need to be heard more clearly.
- **New combinations of skills.** Creative projects bring together combinations of existing skills in new ways to foster regeneration and development.
- **Valuing the contribution of volunteers.** There were dedicated individual volunteers in the communities and projects operating with very scarce resources to provide services for disadvantaged groups.

▪ **Importance of community-based development work.** Challenges of involving more disadvantaged families highlight the importance of community based development work.

▪ **Overall in West Cornwall** the level of commitment, energy and vision is impressive.

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## ***Conclusions***

### **A. Conclusions for West Cornwall LSP**

NRF has proved to be effective in a range of ways in West Cornwall. The research also has implications both for the operation of Neighbourhood Renewal within West Cornwall, and for the design and delivery of rural regeneration initiatives nationally. Specific recommendations from the research relate to the following areas:

#### **i) Mainstreaming, Coordination and Joint Working**

- Rural proofing interlocking area-based initiatives
- Encouraging boundary-spanning
- Exchange and mutual learning between community and statutory sectors
- Encouraging greater flexibility in service provision
- Avoidance of undue delay and bureaucracy in the administration of funding
- Securing mainstream funding
- Greater flexibility and inclusivity in relation to sustainability

#### **ii) Identifying and Targeting Need**

- Better sharing of small-area data
- Establishing effective floor targets for programme delivery

#### **iii) Evaluating the Effectiveness of NRF Policies**

- Focusing on transport, access to services and higher units costs in rural areas
- Tackling employment deprivation
- Addressing the needs of older people, ethnic minorities and disabled people

#### **iv) Improving and Monitoring the Effectiveness of NRF Funding**

- Evaluation of the geographical equity of provision
- Better information on NRF spending both geographically and in relation to target groups
- Increasing fund-raising information and support for small voluntary organisations
- Better information on rural outcomes
- Encouraging rural community involvement
- Encouraging community development approaches
- Greater sustainability of funding and project development

### **B. Wider Policy Implications**

Local initiatives alone cannot provide solutions without the type of basic structural changes at the national and international levels necessary to eliminate poverty.

However, overall Neighbourhood Renewal in West Cornwall is proving to be an effective vehicle for the regeneration of rural areas in the following ways:



- Bringing together a wide range of statutory and community and voluntary sector bodies to address the underlying structural problems facing the region
- Encouraging better co-operation between local authorities in addressing shared problem
- Facilitating joined-up thinking via the LSP structures by a wide range of statutory, local authority and community and voluntary sector bodies, especially pertinent in rural areas
- Utilising the flexibility of Neighbourhood Renewal to ‘plug the gaps’ in existing grant provision and mainstream service provision, especially important in rural areas
- Facilitating a community-based approach to addressing neighbourhood decline

However, this research also raises a number of challenges for the further development of Neighbourhood Renewal in rural areas, and for regeneration work in rural communities more generally.

Further changes to the development, design and delivery of national and local strategies and programmes are needed if the full potential of NRF and other regeneration initiatives are to be realised for rural areas. These changes relate to:

- **The measurement of deprivation:** Census Super Output Areas are simply too large to identify pockets of deprivation in rural areas
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Incorporation of rural perspectives in the NRF evaluation framework is needed, for example through the creation of a rural delivery working group
- **Mainstreaming of rural proofing perspectives.** This is necessary throughout LSPs *and* key provider agencies – again with

implications for the governance of Neighbourhood Renewal in rural areas

- **Refocusing of NRF strategy and expenditure.** Specifically, in relation to:
  - Under-represented thematic areas – transport; access to services
  - Under-represented disadvantaged and minority groups - elderly people; ethnic minority residents
- **Encouraging community development approaches.** Greater recognition of the very significant contribution of community development approaches and consistent and sustained resourcing of such approaches in rural areas.

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