



December 2006

Fifth Progress Report 2005/06

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This is the fifth annual monitoring report on the Rural Services Standard, and the first produced by the independent Commission for Rural Communities. The Rural Services Standard was established in the rural White Paper *'Our countryside: the future. A fair deal for rural England'*. It has been reviewed annually by Defra, in consultation with other government departments and the Commission and its predecessor, the Countryside Agency. The Commission has responsibility to monitor and report annually on the delivery of the Standard.

1.2 Over the past year we have considered, with Defra, whether a nationally defined Standard is still relevant, the extent to which it challenges departments to facilitate the delivery of good quality services in rural areas and the extent to which it is meaningful to people living in rural communities as delivery moves to regional and sub-regional bodies. Some of the targets – such as those for the police and fire service – have already changed to reflect this, but they are not easily monitored at a national level. The report discusses these developments in more detail and how we propose to take forward these, and other issues, in the coming year.

2. EMERGING ISSUES

2.1 Each year we have highlighted areas of concern or emerging issues that we have identified during the monitoring process. This year the following topics have come to our attention.

Rural Services Standards at regional and local level

2.2 There is a continuing move towards setting regional and locally agreed standards rather than a national standard, for example, in the Police and Fire Service standards. While this ensures that targets meet the needs and circumstances of local communities, there is still a need for a national benchmark of expectation to ensure equity, coupled with rigorous monitoring to ensure better performance.

2.3 The Government Office in the North West commissioned research to examine the national Rural Services Standard, to assess whether it was appropriate for application at regional and local level, and if it could be used to tackle social exclusion. The research found that:

- national standards offered very limited help locally in defining and delivering “fair access” to all.
- some current national service standards described a guaranteed level of service for all. While these secured some aspects of a service, they did not consider all aspects of service quality or accessibility, nor necessarily the barriers experienced by a range of individuals accessing the services. For rural areas and communities to derive equal benefit from service standards, measures of

- relative accessibility needed to be included.
- performance indicators that had targets set at below 100% might have an unintended detrimental effect on rural service delivery unless specific steps were taken to disaggregate the data and performance assessment on service delivery between urban and rural areas, and between different types of rural areas (sparse & less sparse, towns and dispersed villages and hamlets).
- service standards must be sufficiently comprehensive so as to address all elements of accessibility; the ability to engage with the service provider and the ability for the service provider and the customer to be in the same place at the same time.

2.4 The report recommended that work be carried out at Local Strategic Partnership level on disaggregating data between rural/urban areas; targeting the most disadvantaged; using a hierarchy of service accessibility to define what is fair in the delivery of rural services (focus on delivering services where people want them); gathering evidence of local delivery barriers, including resources; and using Local Area Agreements to address service equity for rural communities. Detailed findings are available in the full report, *Fair Access to Rural Services in the North West: a study on rural service standards*¹.

2.5 The Commission has carried out a short desk-top audit of other work on rural services standards and access to services being carried out by regional government offices and their pathfinder areas and regional development agencies (RDAs). All of the government offices and their pathfinders were undertaking work relating to fair access to services in developing their regional strategies. However, few of the regional development agencies had done so, although there were examples of RDAs who had provided funding for work on access to services to pathfinder areas. We intend to examine this in more detail with a view to identifying and promoting best practice.

Rural/urban data

2.6 Lack of rural/urban data is still a problem in monitoring some standards, for example choice of healthcare providers, school broadband connectivity. In the case of Internet access, data is not sampled by postcode. Electoral wards are the smallest geographical areas that could be identified, if the sample was large enough. European working groups are examining the possibility of increasing the sample size of the survey in the next few years, making it possible to assess rural/urban areas more accurately, but this will depend on costs.

Extended schools

2.7 Extended schools in rural areas are lagging behind in providing access to a "core offer" of extended services and activities. Just over 3,500 schools currently provide this service and of these only 14% are in rural areas while 85% are in urban areas.

Children's centres

2.8 The CRC commissioned research to examine the development of Phase 1

¹ Fair Access to Rural Services in the North West: A study on Rural Services Standards, http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/environment/ruralpathfinder/documents/access%20to%20services%20thematic%20group/Draft_Study_of_Rural_Service_Standards.pdf#search=%22A%20study%20of%20rural%20service%20standards%22

(August 2004 – March 2006) children's centres in rural areas and assess the part they play in improving access to services for the most disadvantaged children under 5 and their families. The survey included questionnaires completed by rural children's centres and interviews with local authority children's centre lead officers; government office advisers; and with parents who used the children centres. The Sure Start Unit's 'rural uplift' funding was welcomed by the Commission. The report had the following key findings:

- Current targets for the roll out of children's centres should be reassessed by DiES to determine whether they meet the needs of rural families and were best placed to tackle the nature of rural disadvantage.
- The needs of children and families of migrant workers were not well understood and posed significant challenges for children's centres, not only in terms of language and cultural differences, but also how much they could contribute to rural life. The CRC is currently undertaking a scoping study on the economic and social impact of migrant workers, including on the provision of services in rural communities.
- Consultation and community development within rural communities needed extending and investment to ensure that services had the support of residents; that change-averse cultures and attitudes were challenged; and that best use was made of the skills and networks already provided by the voluntary and community sector.
- The co-ordination of policies and programmes for children across government, which impacted upon rural communities, needed to be improved to ensure that they were mutually reinforcing and made the best use of resources to combat poverty and disadvantage

2.9 The overarching message of the report was that equality was not achieved by providing the same service for everyone when developing children's centres in rural areas. Rural proofing must be sensitive to the ways that rurality combines with other types of disadvantage to compound the lack of opportunity and the service experienced by children and families in rural areas. The report recommended that positive steps should be taken to develop programmes for rural children and families, which were particular to their circumstances, rather than mirroring service delivery configurations which worked in urban areas.

Rural post offices

2.10 The Government is currently reviewing the future of the rural post office network. It is Dti's intention to consult publicly on the outcome of the review, but this has been delayed for over a year, causing uncertainty to both customers and subpostmasters. At the time of publication, the nature, shape and timing of the consultation have yet to be announced.

2.11 In the meantime, the Social Network Payment of £150 million a year has been extended until April 2008 and the commitment to prevent avoidable closures will be maintained until a future strategy has been agreed, once consultation has taken place. Despite this, numbers of closures are increasing cumulatively, with the risk that the rural network could continue to shrink in size in an unplanned way, leading to gaps in provision.

2.12 The following section sets out some of the work the Commission for Rural Communities has undertaken over the past year to collate evidence and help to influence the development of government policy.

3. PRIORITIES FROM 2004/05

3.1 Last year's report identified priorities for 2005/06. Progress on these has been as follows:

CRC to continue to refine existing standards and work with Defra and other government departments to develop more focussed and rurally sensitive standards

3.2 Commission and Defra colleagues met earlier this year to discuss ideas for the future of the Rural Services Standard. It was generally agreed that the purpose of the Rural Services Standard needed to be re-defined, but within the context of evolutionary improvement rather than fundamental reform. Although the Rural Services Standard had achieved some early successes, it was felt it was not delivering enough to people who lived in rural communities, and was not making enough impact on service improvements. New standards developed should also include services that are delivered through the private and voluntary sectors. Gaps identified in the service areas in the current Rural Services Standard included crime, youth provision, housing, employment and training, access to financial services, and access to community buildings.

3.3 No new standards were developed for 2006, but existing ones have been revised and updated to take account of policy changes within the relevant government departments.

Monitor and report on existing and new standards introduced in the Rural Services Review 2005

3.4 The table attached as an Annex to this report outlines progress for each standard.

Further research on the impact of the transfer of benefit and pensions payments to Automated Credit Transfer in association with the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters

3.5 We commissioned research, which focused on sub-postmasters in rural England. It was based on a rural analysis of data from the findings of a survey among sub-postmasters, conducted by Ipsos MORI on behalf of the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters. This is the third phase of a research project which examines the major sources of sales-related income following the introduction of a range of new Post Office products and services by Post Office Limited and looks at the profitability of post offices and their attached businesses.

3.6 The research found that, similar to the UK post office network as a whole, the rural network was not in good financial health. Around 9% of a rural English sub-postmasters' income derives from the Post Office Card Account and bill payments, both of which are under threat. The new flagship products, intended to offset loss in pay from many traditional products, are bringing in low levels of income and in many cases nothing at all. Without a suitable replacement for the Government's Social Network Payment which on average, covers nearly half the income of a rural English sub post office, the future of the rural post office network looks extremely uncertain. Moreover, the closure of post offices in rural England is likely to lead to the closure of local shops, as almost nine in ten sub-postmasters in rural England say that their associated business would not provide them with a reasonable living were their post office to close. Detailed findings are available in the report,

Research in association with Postwatch on the social role of rural post offices, which will help inform policy decisions on the future of the rural network

3.7 The research included a review of recent research and survey data, 725 household surveys around 60 post offices in rural and deprived urban areas, comparative analysis of the comprehensive 2001 post office user survey data and 12 local area studies to enable a range of standards and indicators to be put to the test.

3.8 An analysis of accessibility showed that although the national average for households living within 2kms of a post office was 96%, the results revealed markedly lower levels of access in rural areas, particularly in remoter and more sparsely populated areas. In England, only 86% of rural households lived within 2kms of a post office compared to 100% of households in urban areas. Since 2001, there had been a significant shift in the location of post offices people chose to use, in favour of the nearest town centre and/or where they shopped, rather than at the post office nearest to where they lived. Some of this behaviour may have been encouraged by closures during Post Office Limited's Urban Reinvention Programme.

3.9 Satisfaction with post office services remained high, with fewer than 10% expressing dissatisfaction and respondents continuing to attach great importance to the continued existence of local post offices. Overall the five most used services at post offices (purchase of stamps, parcel post, car tax, bill payments and licences) had remained the same. 16% of rural residents used post offices for pensions, (a slight decrease from 18% in 2001) and there had been a slight increase in the number of people using post offices to access cash from 23% to 26% between 2001 and 2005.

3.10 The research explored a wide range of ways in which fair and potentially achievable service standards could be set. They needed to define minimum hours of opening and a core or minimum range of services, which should be available through post offices. Any network change should take account of: walking distance to the closest alternative post office; topography; socio-economic indicators, including health, income, car ownership and index of multiple deprivation; reliance on and availability of public transport; and impact on the local economy.

3.11 Reviews of post office services should involve key local organisations in a consultative forum; "modelling" of options for change and identifying a base network of offices that would be protected; exploring practical ways to deliver outreach, mobile and home delivery services to fill any gaps in a base network; and confirming a preferred local strategy to be implemented by Post Office Limited with other local stakeholders.

3.12 An executive summary of the report, *The Future of the UK's Rural and Deprived Urban Post Office Network*² is available on the Postwatch website.

Consider setting future targets for the standards within a longer time horizon

3.13 The Commission and others have examined the relationship between targets set at national level and regional level. The work carried out by the Government Office of the North West and our own audit of similar work that is being carried out by the regional government offices and the regional development agencies have helped to

² The Future of the UK's Rural and Deprived Urban Post office Network,
http://www.postwatch.co.uk/pdf/Research/1.6.06Future_social_network_erm_exec.pdf

contribute to our internal discussions on the future role and purpose of the Rural Services Standard which we will develop in more detail over the coming year.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 New, more challenging standards and targets need to be developed. We will consider how a national Rural Services Standard can remain relevant alongside the current trend towards setting regional and local standards and targets. We shall explore the concept of developing and setting more challenging 'aspirational' or 'shadow' standards and entitlements that we could monitor against actual performance.

4.2 A national Rural Services Standard is useful, but needs to be translated to regional and local level, for example, through Regional Rural Delivery Frameworks and Local Area Agreements.

4.3 The Commission will identify and promote good practice where work on rural services standards and fair access to services has been carried out by regional government offices and regional development agencies.

4.4 The development of extended schools providing access to the core offer of extended services and activities in rural areas is lagging behind that of urban areas and should continue to be closely monitored.

4.5 DfES should ensure that positive steps are taken to develop children's centres for rural children and families that suit their particular needs and circumstances, rather than simply mirroring methods of service delivery that work in urban areas.

4.6 The commitment to prevent any avoidable closures of rural post offices should be maintained, until a future strategy has been agreed, after a full public consultation on the future of the rural network has taken place.