

think rural

a survey of rural proofing in local authorities

executive summary
March 2004



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Rural proofing is the process of assessing the different impacts a policy might have in rural areas and, where necessary, making adjustments or compensations to reflect rural needs and circumstances.

The Countryside Agency and Local Government Association (LGA) conducted a survey to assess local authorities' existing knowledge and application of rural proofing in order to establish a baseline, and plan effective ways of helping authorities to take full account of rural issues in their policy development, scrutiny processes and service delivery.

This builds on the research undertaken by the Countryside Agency into how local authorities might undertake rural proofing, and the LGA's *'Achieving rural revival'* report which recommended that local authorities should develop rural proofing of policies and service delivery.

The survey was sent to 388 local authorities in England in July 2003. By the final deadline for responses on 7 November 2003, 134 authorities had responded to the survey.

Headline findings:

- 83 per cent of authorities felt that rural proofing could be useful;
- there are many variations in the definition of 'rural' used by local authorities;
- the top-ranked issues for rural communities identified by local authorities were transport and housing, by a considerable margin, followed by improving and protecting the environment, community safety and services for young people;
- authorities thought that transport, then housing, were the services which would benefit the most from rural proofing, but no service scored less than 72 per cent, showing that rural proofing is considered valuable across the board;
- 60 per cent of authorities have either a member with a rural portfolio or indicated rural affairs was within the remit of all their members;
- 60 per cent of authorities had an officer with rural responsibilities or it was the remit of a number of different staff within the authority;
- a similar proportion of authorities (58 per cent) had considered rural issues in relation to Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) and Best Value (54 per cent);
- 35 per cent of authorities had considered rural issues in relation to their Local Public Service Agreement;
- just under half of local authorities had been asked about rural issues by Best Value inspectors and 44 per cent of respondents had been asked about rural issues by Ofsted and the Social Services Inspectorate;
- 57 per cent of areas had a rural partnership, and there were many examples of partnership working and close working between district and county councils;

- 98 per cent were involved in a Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and 32 per cent had used the LSP rural proofing checklist;
- a best practice guide or toolkit was the most popular choice of support for local authorities.

Key messages and recommendations for action:

- there is a ready audience for rural proofing in local authorities;
- the survey reinforces the message that transport/access to services and housing are considered the most significant issues facing rural communities;
- the number of local authorities where rural issues are a designated responsibility at member and officer level is encouraging. The LGA's rural revival study (*Achieving rural revival: LGA 2003*) encouraged local authorities, particularly those that are not predominantly (or all) rural, to have a member play the role of 'advocate' for rural issues. Further research needs to be done on the actual impact this has on improvements for rural communities;
- LSPs are now firmly in place - there is a need to increase the promotion of the benefits of rural proofing to LSPs. Local authorities are key driving agents bringing together LSPs to deliver community strategies;
- the partners within an LSP should be encouraged, and assisted, to undertake rural proofing themselves. There is a need for a clear strategy for promoting rural proofing to a range of organisations (for example the police, primary care trusts etc);
- the good start that has been made by authorities themselves on rural proofing within Best Value and the self assessment portion of CPA needs to be built upon, where possible integrated into performance management systems and shared through publicising good practice. Information on how to embed rural proofing into their processes and best practice information needs to be developed;
- rural proofing appears to have a good fit with the work of scrutiny committees. The Countryside Agency's current investigation into scrutiny committees and rural issues should make a useful contribution to extending good practice;
- rural proofing could usefully be applied to all inspectorates that have responsibility for the standards of local authority services. The first priority is CPA, and Best Value also needs to be considered. Rural proofing should also be promoted to other inspectorates.

This is the executive summary of the LGA's research report *think rural*, which will be published shortly. For a copy of the full report, price £20.00 (£10.00 to member authorities), contact LGconnect on 020 7664 3131 or email info@lga.gov.uk.

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