

# Rural Proofing - policy makers' checklist

## What is rural proofing?

Rural proofing is a commitment by the Government to ensure that all its domestic policies take account of rural circumstances and needs (Rural White Paper, 2000<sup>1</sup>). It is a mandatory part of the policy making process, which means that, as policies are developed, policy makers should systematically:

- consider whether their policy is likely to have a different impact in rural areas, because of particular rural circumstances or needs;
- make a proper assessment of those impacts, if they are likely to be significant;
- adjust the policy, where appropriate, with solutions to meet rural needs and circumstances.

Rural proofing applies to all policies, programmes and initiatives and it applies to both the design and delivery stages.

It has a reporting requirement. Government Departments and Government Offices for the Regions are required to report annually on how their policies have been rural proofed. The Countryside Agency also publishes an annual assessment of the rural proofing of central Departments and Government Offices for the Regions.

## How to use the rural proofing checklist

The checklist is a screening tool, designed to help policy makers consider whether their policy is likely to have a different impact in rural areas. It is meant to be applied from the early stages of policy making, although it may also be used during implementation and evaluation.

If the checklist indicates a need for impact assessment or the development of other policy options, policy makers should use their established methods or seek the advice of the Countryside Agency.

The policy challenges that rural areas present are diverse and the checklist only covers the most typical. Policy makers are encouraged to seek further information from the Countryside Agency or other countryside experts. The checklist is not a substitute for consultation with rural communities, businesses or organisations.

The checklist has been prepared by the Countryside Agency<sup>2</sup>, primarily for central Government and its agencies, but other organisations may also find it helpful. It is designed to be used alongside other appraisal systems, such as Policy Appraisal and the Environment, the Green Ministers' Biodiversity Checklist and Regulatory Impact Assessment. It does not duplicate or substitute for these systems.

<sup>1</sup> 'Our countryside: the future', DETR and MAFF (November 2000).

<sup>2</sup> The Countryside Agency is the statutory body responsible for advising Government and taking action on economical, social and environmental issues affecting the well-being of the English countryside ([www.countryside.gov.uk](http://www.countryside.gov.uk)).

## The rural proofing checklist

Consider all the questions below to help establish whether your initiative is likely to encounter the challenges presented by rural circumstances. Some potential solutions are indicated to help you consider appropriate adjustments.

- 1. Will the policy affect the availability of public and private services?** Might it encourage closure or centralisation and will this have a disproportionate effect in rural areas where services are already limited? How will it affect the Rural Services Standards for key services published in the Rural White Paper (and updated in August 2002)?  
Rural solutions: improve transport/accessibility to compensate for the centralisation of services; encourage alternative funding streams for threatened rural services; provide additional funding to rural outlets to maintain service standards.
- 2. Is the policy to be delivered through existing service outlets, such as schools, banks and GP surgeries?** How will you ensure rural residents can access services in areas where outlets are few and far between?  
Rural solutions: use mobile and outreach services; use ICT to avoid the need to visit outlets; share premises or staff with other service providers to maintain or create a rural outlet ('joint provision').
- 3. Will the cost of delivery be higher in rural areas where clients are more widely dispersed or economies of scale are harder to achieve?** Will longer travel times or distances to clients add to the cost of service provision? Will services need to be run out of smaller outlets, so losing economies of scale?  
Rural solutions: allow for higher unit delivery costs in funding formulae (eg. a 'sparsity' factor) or when specifying cost-efficiency criteria; encourage joint provision to reduce costs.
- 4. Will the policy affect travel needs or the ease and cost of travel?** Will the impact be different in sparsely populated or remote rural areas, where typically journey times are longer, public transport is poor, there are higher levels of car dependency and travel options are limited or expensive, especially for low income groups?  
Rural solutions: reduce the need to travel by using mobile services, local delivery or telephone/internet; ease travel by co-ordinating or improving transport links (eg. additional services, demand responsive transport, community transport/community car schemes, taxi vouchers); alleviate the costs of travel by subsidising services or individuals (remembering that there may be no public transport service between many locations).
- 5. Does the policy rely on communicating information to clients?** How will clients access information in rural areas, where there are fewer (formal) places to obtain advice and information?  
Rural solutions: be flexible and use the networks that do exist eg. post offices, village halls; link up with other information providers; use local radio and newspapers; provide mobile advisers; use information technology (remembering that some groups, such as older people, use ICT less).
- 6. Is the policy to be delivered by the private sector or through a public-private partnership?** Will the smaller and scattered population in rural areas provide a sufficient market to attract the private sector? Will there be similar opportunities for choice and competition? Does the private sector in rural areas have the capacity to deliver?  
Rural solutions: consider the use of regulation, including universal service obligations; set rural delivery targets; draw up contracts which prevent cherry picking of the most profitable (urban) markets; encourage commercial providers with incentives; offset higher rural costs (eg. through rate relief).
- 7. Does the policy rely on infrastructure (eg. broadband ICT, main roads, utilities) for delivery?** How will the policy work in rural areas, where the existing infrastructure is typically weaker (eg. roads, electricity grid), some infrastructure doesn't exist (eg. cable TV, mains gas) and upgrading of infrastructure may be difficult or expensive?  
Rural solutions: consider using regulation or licences to encourage the development of improved infrastructure; encourage or co-ordinate demand to make supply viable; use the public sector's collective demand to stimulate supply; provide alternative means of accessing the service.
- 8. Will the policy impact on rural businesses, including the self-employed?** Will it have a different effect on smaller businesses (which employ a greater proportion of the workforce in rural areas) or those sectors which are typically more significant in rural areas - farming and construction? Will the higher proportion of self-employed people in rural areas be affected by the policy (including women running part-time businesses)?  
Rural solutions: ensure the needs of small businesses are specifically addressed; take support, advice and training out to businesses; where possible avoid regulatory or other burdens that will disproportionately affect small firms.

**9. Will the policy have a particular impact on land-based industries and, therefore, on rural economies and environments?** How will the policy affect the agricultural sector and the mining, extraction and water industries, which have a particular importance in many rural areas? Will there be a knock-on effect on the environment (given that 70% of the land is farmed)? Conversely, if the policy affects the environment, what are the implications for businesses based on natural resources such as tourism, leisure, renewable energy and food production?

Rural solutions: identify 'win-win' solutions which deliver economic and environmental benefits (eg. promoting local supply chains, especially between food producers and consumers); consider incentives for environmentally-friendly practices; allow for and encourage a diverse range of rural enterprises.

**10. Will the policy affect those on low wages or in part-time or seasonal employment?** For those who work in rural areas, wages tend to be lower on average and a higher proportion of the workforce are engaged in part-time or seasonal employment. Will your proposal affect wage levels or people's access to quality employment? Will it affect the type of businesses that tend to pay low wages or offer seasonal/part-time work (eg. agriculture, tourism)?

Rural solutions: check the effects of your proposal against other (especially welfare) policies to ensure that the transition between wages/benefits and employment/unemployment is sufficiently flexible and supportive; consider measures to improve the choice of work (eg. increasing skills, improving local childcare, improving transport to work).

**11. Is the policy to be targeted at the disadvantaged?** How will it target rural disadvantage, which is not usually concentrated in neighbourhoods? Do the indicators to be used for identifying need measure deprivation issues that are particular rural features (eg. access to services, access to job opportunities, low earnings and housing affordability)?

Rural solutions: use small-area statistics to identify pockets of deprivation; adjust the indicators or their weighting to accommodate both urban and rural aspects of deprivation; designate larger areas for targeting, to pick up scattered disadvantage; target population groups rather than areas.

**12. Will the policy rely on local institutions for delivery?** Will the policy be as effective in rural areas, where private, public and voluntary sector organisations tend to be smaller and have less capacity to build partnerships? If funds or services are to be allocated via a bidding process, will small organisations be able to compete fairly?

Rural solutions: provide specific support for capacity building; allow longer timescales for bidding; simplify the bidding process; allow an increased level of public or voluntary sector input to compensate for the possibility of limited private sector input.

**13. Does the policy depend on new buildings or development sites?** Where will these be located in rural areas, given that there are few brownfield sites and fewer locations where housing or other development will be acceptable?

Rural solutions: check the proposal with rural planning authorities; create flexibility for development to be located where it is most appropriate and needed (eg. in market towns or villages); ensure high quality development that will contribute to local character and distinctiveness.

**14. Is the policy likely to impact on the quality and character of the natural and built rural landscape?**

In particular, might it affect landscape or biodiversity sites which are protected by statute (eg. Sites of Special Scientific Interest, National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty)? Outside designated areas, will it conform to the conservation objectives of central government or local planning authorities?

Rural solutions: apply environmental appraisal; consult the relevant Government agencies, the Landscape Character Assessment guidance of the Countryside Agency and local planning authorities or management plans for particular designated areas. Whether it affects protected landscapes or the wider countryside, identify how the policy could create opportunities for the conservation and enhancement of countryside character.

**15. Will the policy impact on people wishing to reach and use the countryside as a place for recreation and enjoyment?** Will it affect the ability of visitors to visit the countryside or the attractiveness and opportunities for enjoyment offered? Will it affect the tourism and leisure industries, which are particularly important in many rural areas?

Rural solutions: consider the possibilities for creating extra opportunities to enjoy the countryside eg. better information about what is available, or new footpaths, bridleways or cycle path links; ensure policies take account of local access issues and do not limit access; protect and where possible improve the accessibility of the countryside (especially by foot, bicycle or public transport) and particularly access for urban populations to their surrounding countryside.

## Steps to take

1. Ensure you are clear about the objectives of the proposed policy development, its intended impacts or outcomes (including which areas, groups or organisations should benefit) and the proposed means of delivery.
2. Run through each question in the checklist, identifying where the proposed policy is likely to have a different impact in rural areas.
3. Where there is uncertainty or a potentially different (worse) impact, this should be investigated further (and included in the overall assessment of the costs and benefits of the policy).
4. Where the impact in rural areas will be significantly different, explore policy options to produce the desired outcomes in rural areas or avoid/mitigate any undesirable impacts. This exercise may also highlight opportunities to maximise positive impacts in rural areas.
5. Seek advice, as necessary, either from the designated rural proofing contacts in your Department or from the Rural Proofing Studies Unit at the Countryside Agency (see end of checklist for details).
6. Feed the results of your appraisal, including solutions, into the decision making process and ensure a record is kept, to be included in your Department's annual rural proofing report.

**For further information please contact:**  
The Rural Proofing Studies Unit at the  
Countryside Agency.  
Tel: 020 7340 2971

## Publications containing further information and advice

From the Countryside Agency:

- State of the countryside 2002 (CA 109) – latest annual report providing a range of economic, social and environmental statistics and trends about the countryside. Regional editions are also available.
- Rural services in 2000 (CA 48) – latest of a tri-annual survey on the availability of key services to rural communities.
- Rural Services Standard: First progress report 2001/02 (CA 115) – report to Government on the progress of rural service delivery.
- Rural Proofing: A report to government by the Countryside Agency (CA 107) – an annual report assessing rural proofing by Government Departments.
- Rural Proofing in practice – a forthcoming publication by the Countryside Agency, with examples of rural proofing practice and solutions.
- Market Towns toolkit: securing a stronger future (CA 27) – a leaflet about this policy toolkit, to help communities assess and improve the vitality of their town and surrounding countryside.
- The joint provision of services 2000 (CAX 49) – assesses examples where service providers have shared premises, vehicles or staff to ensure their services are accessible in rural areas.
- The pub is the hub: A good practice guide (CA 95) – examples of rural pubs being used to provide a range of other services to rural communities.
- Great ways to go: Good practice in rural transport (CA 62) – examples of good practice in rural transport.

There are various other good practice guides with solutions on specific services or policy topics.

Countryside Agency publications are available via [www.countryside.gov.uk](http://www.countryside.gov.uk) - or can be ordered by telephoning 0870 120 6466 or faxing 0870 120 6467.

From the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA):

- Rural Services Standard 2002 – minimum standards for public services and service targets in rural areas.
- The Way Ahead for Rural Services: a guide to good practice in locating rural services (2002).
- Policy Appraisal and the Environment: Policy Guidance (1998).
- Green Ministers' Biodiversity Checklist (2000).

DEFRA publications are available via [www.defra.gov.uk](http://www.defra.gov.uk) or can be ordered by telephoning 08459 556000.

From the Office of the Deputy-Prime Minister:

- User Guide to Urban and Rural Area Definitions - provides standard geographical definitions of rural areas, which can be used when analysing data (2002).

Available via [www.odpm.gov.uk](http://www.odpm.gov.uk)



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