

The rural difference

A short guide to rural proofing in economic development





This guide from the East of England Development Agency (EEDA) provides an overview of the principles of rural proofing and how it can be done. It looks at how rural proofing can be applied to an organisation's infrastructure, to strategic planning and how it can be used to plan, monitor and review individual interventions.

The guide is accompanied by a comprehensive, step-by-step evaluation tool to support the rural proofing of projects, which can be accessed from www.eeda.org.uk/ruralproofing

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Introduction: What is rural proofing?

There is no standard definition of rural proofing, and different agencies and organisations, both within the East of England and elsewhere, have developed their own definitions. However, the closest to a generally accepted definition of rural proofing is the one given in the 2000 Rural White Paper:

Rural proofing means that as policy is developed and implemented policy-makers should systematically:

- think about whether there will be any significant differential impacts in rural areas¹
- if there are such impacts, assess what these might be
- consider what adjustments or compensations might be made to fit rural circumstances.

Rural proofing is not unlike an equality impact assessment, where the potentially adverse impacts of projects, policies or actions on different identity groups are addressed. One could say that rural proofing is a rural equality impact assessment – where equality impact assessments check the possible differential

impacts on women and men, people from different ethnic backgrounds and so on, rural proofing checks the possible differential impacts on rural communities.

Rural proofing can be done by service delivery organisations to evaluate their work or by funding bodies to guide allocation of funds. It can be applied both at a strategic level (overall strategies, policies, and strategic priorities) and at an operational level (specific projects or activities).

People sometimes talk about the rural proofing of documents (e.g. rural proofing a business plan) but this only makes sense insofar as the strategies, policies and project activities contained in this document are concerned. Rural proofing a document does not mean examining whether, where or how often the word 'rural' shows up! It is about ensuring that at every level rural issues have been considered, leading to practical and budgeted actions to be planned and implemented.

In this respect, initial rural proofing may be considered in the context of urban/rural data collection and evaluation of that data as to whether the different aspects of the urban/rural split may impact on strategy, policy and programmes through to delivery. Therefore when activities are planned and delivered the effectiveness and general impact of the delivery can be measured in terms of rural and urban areas.

¹ The accepted definition by the Office of National Statistics is that all settlements with populations greater than 10,000 are urban. All smaller settlements are rural.

Rural proofing can take place at any time in the lifecycle of strategies, policies or project activities: at the time of strategic priority-setting, conceptualisation of policies, design of project activities, implementation of activities and at the evaluation or review of priorities or projects. However, a key requirement for rural proofing is that it must still be possible to make adjustments. This means that, if rural proofing is undertaken after decisions have been made, a mechanism must be in place to re-open the debate and if necessary adjust these decisions. Good quality data and information collection and evaluation must therefore be a central and critical aspect of assessing successful rural proofing tools.

Assessing the impact

Rural proofing assesses the possible differential impact of strategies, policies and project activities on rural communities. This differential impact might manifest itself in three different ways:

- rural needs might differ from the needs of urban communities – there are no exclusively rural needs, but a number of needs (for example transport) may be more acute in rural areas
- solutions to a given need for rural areas might differ from the solutions that work in urban areas

- strategies, policies or project activities might result in (unintended) adverse consequences for rural communities, even if this is not the case for urban communities or only to a lesser extent.

Finally, it is important to recognise that rural proofing refers to:

- the process of examining possible differential rural impacts
- the outcomes of this examination in terms of adjustments made
- having a clear set of guidelines on how to identify distinct rural characteristics of geographical areas and how they may differ from urban areas.

"What if our focus isn't on rural issues?"

Rural proofing doesn't mean that your strategies and policies must include a focus on rural needs. It may be that you choose to focus on urban issues, but rural proofing enables you to re-evaluate your priorities or make explicit your urban focus and reasons behind this focus. It does not prescribe any outcomes in terms of rural prioritisation or insist that a proportion of your budget must be allocated for rural projects or rural priorities.

Summary

Rural proofing means:

- the process through which stakeholders assess the differential impact of the overall strategic priority-setting and specific interventions on rural communities
- the adjustments made to the overall strategic priority-setting or to specific interventions as a result of the identification of any adverse impacts
- having clear guidelines for identifying distinct rural needs.

The three key questions for rural proofing your programme are:

- how does the programme address the needs of rural communities?
- to what extent has the programme developed specific solutions to enable rural communities to benefit fully from its initiatives?
- in what ways might the programme lead to any (unintended) adverse impacts on rural communities and what can be done to avoid, minimise or negate this impact?

How to: Doing rural proofing

Rural proofing is not a one-off audit exercise but a long-term approach to ensuring that your organisation considers rural needs. The steps you take to adopt that approach will depend on the nature of your work and your organisation. This guide doesn't specify how you should do rural proofing, but provides some ideas by looking at three different levels: organisational infrastructure, strategic priority setting, and individual interventions.



Rural proofing organisational infrastructure

The first stage is to consider to what extent your organisation is naturally geared towards rural issues. Here are some of the actions you could take to support rural proofing at this level:

- designate a team member as a rural champion. Having a rural champion is obviously no substitute for rural proofing – neither does it mean that rural proofing becomes the sole responsibility of one person. The role of the rural champion is to remind the rest of the team to keep an eye on the rural dimension of any activity or discussion they undertake
- raise awareness about rural proofing, for example by organising training workshops on rural proofing or distributing rural proofing material
- raise capacity within the organisation on how to collect and evaluate what data and information may be required to undertake a rural proofing exercise of any strategy, policy, programme or activity
- ensure proportional representation – make sure that the membership of your board or advisory group represents the urban and rural constituencies in which you operate, for example against the proportions in the population or against key rural needs
- undertake a budget check to assess the percentage of the budget that benefits rural and urban individuals. At this early stage of the rural proofing process it will probably be too cumbersome to try to assess for each project to what extent it is intended to benefit, or has benefited, rural and urban individuals (although inclusion of a rural/urban parameter in the monitoring data might make this possible at a later stage). A first step could be to indicate what percentage of the available budget has been spent on specific rural projects (based in rural areas and/or mainly targeting rural people). As mentioned earlier, rural proofing does not imply that a part of the budget must be spent on rural projects, and it is possible that the budget check shows that the whole budget has been spent on urban communities. Rural proofing aims to make choices more explicit and visible.

Checklist

- Do you have a rural champion?
- Have any rural proofing training activities been organised? If so, how many sessions, how many attendees per session and who were the target groups (e.g. project managers, board members, other stakeholders, etc.)?
- Have any rural proofing materials been distributed? If so, which materials and to whom? Is there a need to raise capacity within the organisation on how to collect and evaluate what data and information may be required to undertake a rural proofing exercise of any strategy, policy, programme or activity?
- Is your board or advisory group representative of both the urban and rural communities in the area where you operate? How many individuals could be considered to represent urban communities, how many rural communities and how many both?
- Has a budget check been undertaken? If yes, what proportion of the available budget has been spent on rural and urban individuals respectively (or if this is not known, on specific rural projects, based in rural areas and mainly targeting rural communities)?

Rural proofing strategic priority setting

The second stage is to look at your priorities. Rural proofing the process of strategic priority setting relates to the question of rural needs: are the needs of rural communities being addressed? To answer this question it's essential to know what those needs are.

Some of these needs are readily apparent. To a large extent the needs of rural and urban communities are the same, so needs that have been identified for the region or a sub-region as a whole are likely to be felt by both communities. There is also consistent national evidence that rural communities experience difficulties in accessing services because of more limited service provision and longer travel times (and therefore also higher travel costs).

Other needs will be more specific to particular rural areas. It is therefore important for organisations doing rural proofing to develop an understanding of the particular geographic and thematic characteristics and subsequent needs of rural communities in their area. These may be identified at a broad level, (e.g. business support needs of rural enterprises) or a more detailed level (e.g. employment support needs of lone parents without a car living in rural communities and working in rural enterprises).

Once this has been done, three questions can be asked of each need:

1. Is this need currently being addressed?

It may be mentioned in strategic planning documents, but are there any specific initiatives or approaches that are tackling this, either by you or by other organisations? These could be either specific projects targeted at rural communities or urban-based or generic service provision that has been made accessible to rural communities.

2. If the need is currently not being addressed, should you be addressing it?

It is clearly not possible for any organisation to tackle every need, so there needs to be a process of prioritisation. Two further questions may help:

- will the impact of addressing the need be high or low?
- will addressing the need be difficult or easy (including resource implications)?

High impact and easy activities are obvious candidates for inclusion as priorities. However, they should not be automatically included, and neither should low impact or difficult activities be excluded.

3. If the need is a priority, how can it be addressed?

This involves identifying strategic interventions and delivery options, who in the organisation will be responsible, how will the impact be measured and what the timeframe will be.

An illustration of some of the needs in the East of England is given at the end of this document along with examples of initiatives to meet the particular needs of rural communities.

Checklist

- What are the needs in your area of operation?
- Are these needs currently being addressed? How, and by whom? (This could include specific rural projects and efforts undertaken to make generic or urban-based provision more accessible to rural communities.)
- If a need is not being addressed, would the impact of addressing it be high or low?
- Would the level of efforts and resources required to address this need be high or low?
- On the basis of this information, should you deal with this unaddressed need as a priority?
- If it is considered a priority, what steps will you take to determine how you can address it and measure the success of addressing it for future development needs?

Rural proofing individual interventions (operational projects)

The final stage is to examine the potential effects or the outcomes of individual interventions on rural communities. Rural proofing allows service delivery organisations to check the impact of their activities and evaluate new project ideas. It can also be used as a tool for funding bodies to appraise applications and delivery of projects.

The three key questions for rural proofing that were set out at the end of the introduction are also the main questions that should be asked of specific projects:

- how does the project address rural communities' needs?
- to what extent has the project developed specific solutions to enable rural communities to benefit fully from the initiative?
- how might the project lead to any (unintended) adverse impacts on rural communities and what can be done to avoid, mitigate or negate this?

For some project managers these three questions may offer sufficient guidance and they may prefer to formulate responses to these questions using a format of their own. Others, however, might find it difficult to get their head around the three core questions and might like additional guidance, especially in the early stages of the rural proofing process. This is why the East of England

Development Agency (EEDA) has developed a more detailed evaluation tool, which is available from www.eeda.org.uk/ruralproofing. The tool comprises a series of questions, taking the project managers through the rural aspects of the different project stages:

- the design and planning of the intervention
- marketing and engagement with the target group(s)
- project delivery, including coordination with other providers
- impact assessment and design of remedial actions if required.

It is obvious that the rural proofing evaluation tool needs to be used flexibly. For example, it might not be possible for project managers to answer all questions – there may not be sufficient information at this stage or the question may not be relevant. In either case, the reason for not answering the question can be recorded.

Certain questions may lead project managers to think about other rural aspects of their projects, and they could be encouraged to add further explanations on specific points.

However, each organisation that chooses to adopt the evaluation tool as part of its rural proofing needs to decide for itself exactly how much flexibility will be given to project managers. In particular, it needs to decide whether or not project managers can opt out of using the tool altogether and choose to answer the three core

rural proofing questions using a format of their own. This will probably depend on the extent to which the evaluation is seen as an instrument not only to support but also to assess project managers.

Stages of rural proofing projects

There are three key stages for rural proofing specific projects: assessing projects at an early design stage, periodic monitoring and evaluation during delivery, and finally end of project review and evaluation. For this reason the evaluation tool has different parts for the stages.

The first part could be embedded as a formal part of a project appraisal process. This would encourage projects managers to consider and address rural issues from the start and would give early warning of any changes that need be made to delivery methods or budgets. It would encourage managers of smaller projects in particular to plan ahead for the impact assessment stage.

However, if used as a means of appraising funding applications, it's worth bearing in mind that any additional requirements could deter small projects from applying. Project managers may also be tempted to respond very positively in order to secure funds.

At interim monitoring stage, using the second part of the rural proofing tool may highlight areas for improvement and provide early evidence of impacts and gaps in delivery while the project is still able to adjust its focus. For short-term projects this may not be necessary as a matter of routine but can be useful for resolving any specific issues that arise.

Finally at the end of project review, the third part of the rural proofing exercise has the benefit of assessing overall delivery and the impacts on rural populations. It can also be a valuable step to inform future provision and identify good practice and gaps in provision.



Conclusion

How you do rural proofing is up to you. What's important is that you decide what works for your organisation and take the time to implement it thoroughly. It's better to take a few steps and do them well than try to do everything at once without much depth.

You may also want to think of ways you can demonstrate what you have done on rural proofing to your stakeholders. You could take a section in your business plan or annual report for example to state what changes you have made to your organisation's infrastructure; what evidence you've gathered on rural needs; the process you've adopted to review your priorities and projects and what actions you've taken or intend to take as a result. If you're still part way through adopting rural proofing, you could outline what your future plans are.

For further support on rural issues, visit:

- Rural Action East
www.ruralactioneast.org.uk
- Commission for Rural Communities
www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk
- Natural England
www.naturalengland.org.uk

Examples: Meeting the needs

An illustration of needs in the East of England

Employment support

- Overall, the number of employment support services is lower and decreasing faster in rural areas: of the 906 Jobcentre Plus offices in England, only 41 are located in rural areas; there was a 21 per cent reduction in rural Jobcentre Plus offices between 2000 and 2006 (compared to an 11 per cent reduction in urban areas). Rural areas tend to have more people in self-employment, part-time employment and more home workers than urban areas.
- Within the East of England the labour market outperforms the UK average, but progress since 2004 has not kept up with other regions. The current economic downturn will certainly place additional pressure on rural communities.
- The population within the East of England is ageing which means that the labour force potential among over 50s is growing and that a change in organisations' and businesses' culture to recruitment, retention (and training) of over 50s is needed. The ageing population also has implications for young people of working age, in that more might become responsible for caring for older relatives. Currently about 10 per cent of the region's population are working as unpaid carers.
- Low income in rural East of England is not just about lack of paid work, it is also about low pay: half of the 400,000 people in rural East of England who live in a household below the Government's poverty have at least one working adult in their households. The proportion of employees on low pay is higher in rural East of England than in urban areas of the region. The situation is further aggravated for rural areas because of the housing situation: overall wages in rural areas have not kept up with the increase in house prices. Low paid workers can be found in the agriculture sector, the retail sector, and health and social work.
- While the region's overall activity rate is high, there are a number of groups at higher risk of unemployment, including female lone parents, disabled people and some black and ethnic minority communities. Only 23 per cent of female lone parents are in full-time employment. Unemployment rates amongst disabled people and some black and ethnic minority communities are more than twice the regional average rate of employment. In rural areas, 10 per cent of economically active young adults are officially unemployed.
- Finally, the region has a large seasonal (mainly migrant) workforce in the food processing industry. There are issues of under-utilisation of skilled migrant workers and concerns about discrimination including levels of pay and the less than equal treatment experienced by some workers in the region.

Examples | The rural difference

Skills

- In general, rural areas tend to fare better than urban areas in terms of educational attainment at school but their workforce tends to be less qualified. Access to learning opportunities remains a constant issue for rural communities. They face barriers, such as transport issues, whilst many rural businesses are still not engaged in workforce development for reasons such as course length and inflexible delivery methods.
- The East of England's skills base compares unfavourably to other regions, especially in terms of intermediate and higher-level qualifications. The region is underperforming against the national average across all skill types and is the worst-performing region in general IT skills.
- The share of the region's workforce with no qualifications is 15 per cent of the working age population. Take-up of vocational learning is below the national average and in four of the six Learning & Skills Council areas. An above average (England comparison) proportion of young people choose post-16 options which involve no further learning. The NVQ Level 2 achievement of 19-year-olds is fractionally lower than the national average and appears to be on a downward trend. The number of resident 21-year-olds achieving NVQ Level 3 is mostly below the national average.

- Specifically in the rural areas of the East of England, an area of concern is that 25 per cent of 16-year-olds do not obtain any GCSEs at Grade C or above.

Enterprise

- Rural enterprises face a number of issues, including the fact that economies of scale (for example in services) are harder to achieve with clients more widely dispersed and that the rural infrastructure tends to be less developed. This is not only true for transport infrastructure, but also for information and communication technology. Access to business support services (including workforce development support) can be an issue.
- Within the East of England, business formation stalled in 2004 following nine consecutive years of growth in the region's VAT registered business stock. Over the long-term the rate of business formation in the East of England has been close to the national average but below London and the South East. Despite a recent increase in the proportion of female-owned enterprises in the region, female business start-up rates, whilst improving, remain considerably behind those of men.

Access to services in rural areas

- Overall, rural areas tend to have more difficulties in accessing services because there is less service provision and travel times tend to be longer. This is not necessarily an indication of deprivation: accessing services is often less problematic when households own a car. The two types of households that are least likely to own a car are single pensioners and lone parents: almost a third of the 50,000 lone parents and 60 per cent of single pensioners in the rural districts of the East of England do not own a car.
- The region has the lowest bus usage in England. Unlike London and the South East, bus usage in the East of England has fallen every year since 2001 (despite an increasing population).

Examples | The rural difference

Ideas

Here are some ideas of how initiatives can be adjusted to allow rural communities to benefit fully:

- set up service delivery points in central locations in rural areas (e.g. market towns)
 - offer transport subsidies (e.g. taxi vouchers) to (disadvantaged) individuals living in more remote rural areas to allow them to access service delivery in nearby towns or urban areas
 - organise a bus picking up customers/ participants in the surrounding villages and delivering them back afterwards or a shuttle service between the point of service delivery and the nearest train station
 - adjust opening/operating hours to better reflect transport options available to rural communities (e.g. public bus or train timetables)
 - experiment with ICT-based solutions to community consultation or service delivery (e.g. distance learning) – this does not only include use of internet and email, but also for example video and telephone conferencing
 - experiment with mobile service delivery, offering services directly to the customer (e.g. in rural businesses) or to rural venues at set times
- use additional/alternative venues to engage with rural communities either locally in the rural areas (e.g. pubs, village halls) or in central locations in market towns or urban areas where people from rural communities come (e.g. supermarkets)
 - liaise with voluntary and community groups that are already active in rural areas to engage with rural communities
 - set rural standards/targets to prevent private providers or project managers from focusing on the more profitable urban areas
 - subsidise private providers/project managers for delivery in rural areas or change the funding formulae to reflect the higher cost of delivery in rural areas
 - ring-fence part of the budget for delivery in rural areas
 - launch a separate rural pilot to test rural service delivery options
 - roll out successful urban initiatives across rural areas.

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