Research notes

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The Countryside Agency

Rural proofing the delivery chain

Rural proofing must affect more than policy making – it must make a difference on the ground.

Summary

In the Rural White Paper (2000) the Government undertook to 'rural-proof' its policies, to ensure that they did not have adverse effects on rural areas. Many of these policies are delivered on the ground by regional and local bodies, such as local authorities. They are becoming increasingly influential in the formulation of policy, especially at regional level, as Government tries to be more responsive to local circumstances.

For rural proofing to be effective on the ground, every player in the delivery chain must be involved. If one of these links is weak on rural proofing, the entire policy in rural areas could be undermined.

A research project conducted in the East Midlands identified that the Government department from which the policy emanates should ensure rural proofing happens throughout the delivery chain. But it also found that there are important complementary roles for others, at local, regional and national level.

Background

In the Rural White Paper (2000), the Government committed itself to rural proof its policy making. It defined this requirement as follows:

'As policy is developed and implemented policy makers should systematically:
– think about whether there will be any significant differential impacts in rural areas;
– if there are such impacts assess what these might be;
– consider what adjustments/compensations might be made to fit rural circumstances.'

(HMSO: RWP p. 158)

Working for people and places in rural England

Policy making is an increasingly cyclical process, with consultation, collaboration, learning, testing and adapting.

Methodology

As part of its own commitment to rural proofing the Government Office for the East Midlands (GOEM) agreed to undertake a research project in partnership with the Countryside Agency. The Regional Co-ordination Unit (RCU) of the Office of Deputy Prime Minister provided advice and links to departments in Whitehall.

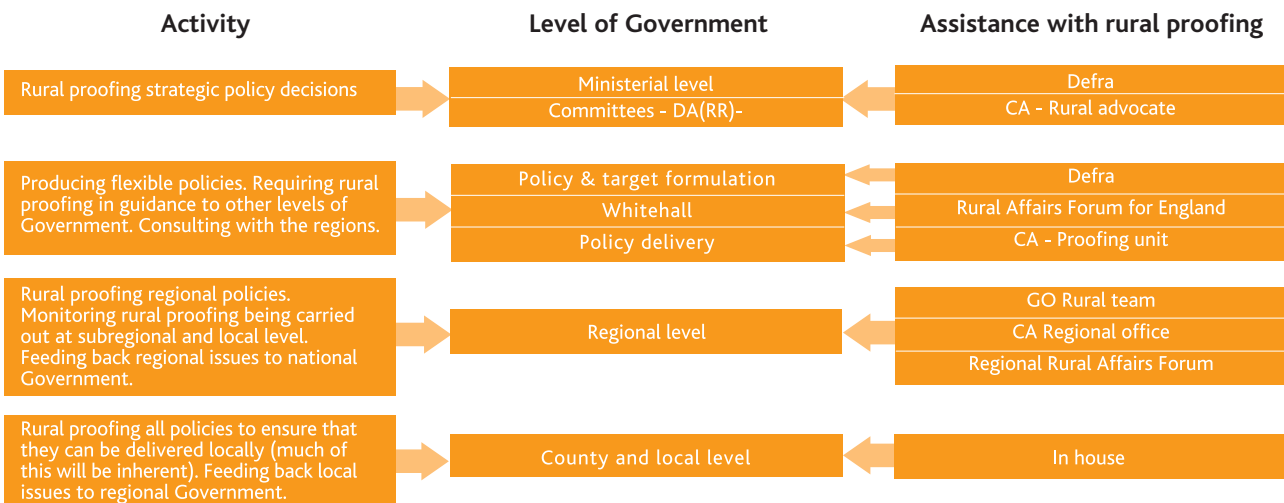Consultants studied a small sample of workflows which pass through GOEM by:

- identifying how, and at what points, rural proofing is currently undertaken in the chain of policy delivery – from initial policy formulation in Whitehall, to the determination of local submissions by the GO;
- evaluation of how comprehensive and informed this rural proofing is;
- making recommendations for improved rural proofing at appropriate stages.

Rural proofing at national, regional and local level

GOs play a role in the design and implementation of a wide range of Government policies. The delivery of many of these policies is dependent on regional and local agencies.

There are a variety of sources of advice and support available at each level of governance – see Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Responsibilities for rural proofing at levels of Government

Activity	Level of Government	Assistance with rural proofing
Rural proofing strategic policy decisions	Ministerial level / Committees - DA(RR)-	Defra / CA - Rural advocate
Producing flexible policies. Requiring rural proofing in guidance to other levels of Government. Consulting with the regions.	Policy & target formulation / Whitehall / Policy delivery	Defra / Rural Affairs Forum for England / CA - Proofing unit
Rural proofing regional policies. Monitoring rural proofing being carried out at subregional and local level. Feeding back regional issues to national Government.	Regional level	GO Rural team / CA Regional office / Regional Rural Affairs Forum
Rural proofing all policies to ensure that they can be delivered locally (much of this will be inherent). Feeding back local issues to regional Government.	County and local level	In house

Perceived barriers to effective rural proofing

In interviews with people involved in policy making and delivery, the following barriers to rural proofing emerged.

a) **Lack of knowledge**. Many policymakers at a national, regional and local level are still unaware of the particular needs of rural areas. Training for policymakers does not appear to highlight the need to consider the 'rural dimension'.

b) **Proofing overload**. A considerable amount of other forms of proofing is required, such as gender, race, climate change and sustainable development.

c) **Rural image**. To some of those interviewed, 'rural' did not equate with the need for special treatment. The concept of sparsely populated areas was more meaningful in policy terms.

d) **Definition of rural**. It is sometimes not clear what 'rural' means – agricultural or non-urban. The inclusion of market towns blurs the definition further.

e) **Responsibility for rural proofing**. The Countryside Agency and the GO rural team say that policy teams should rural proof their own policies, but this is not always understood by others.

f) **Method of rural proofing**. The checklist was not widely known or used in the region. Most regional and sub-regional bodies thought that rural issues were inherently taken into account because of the nature of the region. However it seems generally accepted that rural proofing should be done formally at national level.

g) **Impact of rural proofing**. There is a danger that rural proofing is seen as a tickbox exercise. The point of rural proofing is that changes are made if a policy is found to operate differentially, and these solutions will themselves have to be rural proofed.

h) **Route of policy stream**. Not all policies go through the Government Office. Different methods for rural proofing and for monitoring rural proofing will apply depending on the policy.

i) **Incomplete evidence base**. There is a shortage of high-quality information on rural areas and a rural-urban analysis of area-wide data necessary for setting and monitoring targets for rural objectives. Where data is available, the people who need it may not realise or have access to it.

j) **Lack of compulsion**. The Countryside Agency's Rural Proofing Annual Reports have undoubtedly been successful in making Whitehall raise their game on rural proofing. However, the annual report does not compell Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) or local authorities to address rural issues.

k) **Funding**. The costs of providing services in rural areas are higher than in urban areas, the reasons for which include distance and lack of economies of scale.

l) **Timing**. Policies are sometimes developed in a short timespan and there is not enough time to incorporate rural issues fully.

m) **Proving the case**: Simple monitoring data can not always be used to demonstrate objectively the benefits of rural proofing. Not only is the supply of services generally poorer, but information on, and expectations of, entitlement are sometimes lower.

Recommendations for further action

To overcome these perceived barriers, there is a need to develop the role of rural proofing at every level of Government.

Whitehall policymakers

Rural proofing needs to remain formally attached to the drivers of Government activity, namely funding and PSA targets. These links need to be strengthened by ensuring that rural proofing is included within the formal agreements for departments to meet their PSA targets. Spending Reviews provide further opportunities to include rural targets.

RCU can continue to assist in promoting the implementation of Rural Proofing across the GO network. Defra should work with departments and GOs to ensure that the GO role in rural proofing is clear, and that it figures in their business plans.

Regional Government Offices

GOs could champion rural proofing where they do not have direct control of a policy. GOs could pass on the message that rural proofing is needed, and also monitor what is done and feed issues back up to Whitehall.

GOs could be asked to check that adjustments made as a result of rural proofing do not impose perverse constraints on implementing a policy.

Mechanisms more appropriate than checklists should be considered at regional and sub-regional level, such as developing area based groups to deliver policy. The Rural Services Standard should be used to promote the need for rural proofing.

Government departments

Mechanisms that support or have the same effect as rural proofing should be developed to:

- incorporate rural proofing into policy impact appraisal methodologies;
- work together with other proofing bodies. Seek to get all types of proofing into relevant civil servants' workplans. Consider forming a 'proofing alliance' comprising all the departments and agencies charged with proofing policies.

Evidence should be recorded to show how rural proofing has taken place in policy development and has made a difference where necessary. Three categories of indicator need to be developed to enable specific measurement of progress in rural proofing:

- process indicators to show inputs made to the workflow as a result of rural proofing;
- milestone indicators to show how changes have been made to delivery;
- outcome indicators to show how the measures benefit the rural population.

Departments should report on good practice both to spread knowledge of rural proofing and to encourage compliance. Best practice should illustrate both outcomes and mechanisms. Case studies could be publicised through websites and the Countryside Agency's annual Rural Proofing report.

Networking should be used within Whitehall to promote rural proofing. The Countryside Agency and other departments, especially the Treasury, should maintain secondments of personnel.

Training should be developed to raise awareness and understanding of rural issues in the civil service. Ideally, training should be part of 'integrated policy analysis' and cover all the forms of proofing and assessment.

Finally, for rural proofing to be embedded throughout the delivery chain, clear procedures need to be established by the authors of policy – Whitehall and Government departments. These procedures should be verified in the Countryside Agency's annual Rural Proofing report. The long-term cultural change necessary can be best achieved by integrating rural proofing into the training programme for policy staff.

Further reading

Rural Proofing in 2002/03 (2003). CA146, Countryside Agency, Cheltenham. Available at: www.countryside.gov.uk

Rural proofing – policy maker's checklist (2002). CA 35, Countryside Agency, Cheltenham. Available at: www.countryside.gov.uk

Impact Assessment and Appraisal Guidance Checklist for Policy Makers (2002). Cabinet Office.

Rural Services Standard (2003) Defra. Available at: www.defra.gov.uk

Countryside Agency Research Notes can also be viewed on our website: www.countryside.gov.uk