



Campaign to Protect  
Rural England

## *Policy Position Statement*

# Rural Services

CPRE believes that rural services such as post offices, banks, local shops, schools, busses and pubs, play a vital role in the economies and communities of rural areas. It is in all our interests to ensure that we have a countryside where people can have access to services nearby. Local services improve the quality of life and bring environmental benefits such as reduced travel and lower traffic levels.

A lack of services affects more than the immediate recipients. It harms the sustainability, economic viability and attractiveness of rural areas.

### **What are the issues for the countryside**

Nine out of ten of us feel that it is 'important to most people in England today to keep the English countryside the way it is now' (Countryside Agency, *The state of the countryside 2003*, 2003).

Yet the countryside is changing rapidly, and many things that make rural areas special and interesting places to live and visit are being lost. Our rural towns and villages are becoming more homogenous and less interesting, just as much of our countryside is becoming blander and losing character.

Post offices continue to close in rural areas, we are losing independent garages, and evidence suggests that 300 rural shops in Britain are closing a year (NEF, *Ghost Town Britain*, 2002). The

Countryside Agency estimate that 7 out of 10 villages in England now no longer have a shop. We have also lost a quarter of bank branches since 1995 alone, with the greatest losses occurring in small towns and villages (Campaign for Community Banking Services, *Branch Network Reduction Report*, 2005). Even local pubs are suffering with 20 traditional pubs closing every month across Britain (Campaign for Real Ale, 2000).

But why is it important that we maintain a high level of service provision in rural areas? Why don't we just let people go elsewhere when their local shop or library closes down?

The loss of local services not only inconveniences those living in the area, but creates an economic cycle where there is no longer the critical mass of local provision necessary to make up a vibrant local economy. More and more services close as people find they are forced to go elsewhere for everyday needs. There are many problems that stem from service loss and frequently these can reinforce

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each other creating a vicious cycle.

Disadvantages include:

- > wider environmental effects, such as more traffic on rural roads and increasing dependence upon the private car. The average length of a journey by car has already increased by 10% between 1989/91 and 2002;
- > a detrimental impact on the local economy as people and businesses go elsewhere to meet their needs, or even move out of the area. Small businesses can be particularly vulnerable. Around 90% of small businesses (those with fewer than ten employees) use local post offices and a large proportion of local businesses are reliant on regular bank visits. Farmers wishing to diversify need a certain level of service infrastructure, such as local abattoirs, post offices and retail outlets for marketing their produce. As rural communities lose their ability to meet their own needs, their dependence on neighbouring urban areas increases;
- > harm to people's health and quality of life as they become more reliant on the private car, and walking or cycling on country lanes becomes more dangerous; and
- > an increase in social exclusion: those unable to get to neighbouring towns suffer most when local facilities close.

On the other hand, the availability of vibrant local services brings great benefits to rural areas. Benefits of local service provision include:

- > jobs and economic activity and support for local businesses, all of which helps rural regeneration;

- > increased local cash flow. The multiplier effect (or the number of times money circulates in the local economy generating further economic activity) of small shops is higher than for supermarkets. The rate of small shop closures is thought to be costing local economies almost £550 million a year in lost revenue (CPRE 2001). Visitors will spend more if services are available. A quarter of all day trips in England are to the countryside, but average day spend per visitor is £11.73 compared to £20.90 for urban visits (Countryside Agency, *The state of the countryside 2003*, 2003). Attractive local services selling distinctive local products may encourage more spending;
- > a market for local produce and supplies which again helps retain economic benefits within the immediate area and reduces the distance goods travel;
- > local character and links with the past, bringing diversity and interest to rural areas through a strong sense of local distinctiveness and loyalty. This in turn boosts social engagement;
- > no need for land hungry developments, such as out of town supermarkets or service stations, which degrade the condition of surrounding countryside. More local services can avoid further congestion and greenfield development;
- > valuable opportunities for human contact, bringing vitality to villages and small communities; and
- > a lifeline to those most in need such as the elderly, the young and those without a car who depend upon local services every day.

**FURTHER READING**

*CPRE, Mapping Local Food Webs, 2002*

*CPRE, Food Webs, [reprinted] 2002*

*CPRE, Local Food in Britain: a research review for CPRE (2001)*

*CPRE, Rural Services: a framework for action, 1999*

*New Economics Foundation, Ghost Town Britain, 2003*

*Social Exclusion Unit, Making the Connections: final report on transport and social exclusion, 2003*

*Postwatch, The impact of Post Office closures in the rural community, 2002*

*The Countryside Agency, The economic significance of post offices in rural areas, 2000*

*DEFRA, Rural services standard 2003, 2003*

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## CPRE's approach

The value of rural services to rural communities is clearly demonstrated by CPRE's *Food Webs* research. This began as a simple survey in a Suffolk village, carried out in response to a planning application for a proposed edge of town supermarket development. The survey revealed the importance of shops and services to sustaining a wide range of rural businesses and local people. The potential impacts of the supermarket development on local jobs and local services, and subsequently on the community, the local environment and local economy were shown to be so significant that the application was turned down.

CPRE believes that essential rural services should be protected, and where possible, their accessibility should be enhanced. Policies should aim to bring services to people in the first place so communities can easily use them. Rural public transport should then be improved where it makes sense to locate services in larger settlements like market towns.

The Government needs to build on the excellent foundation provided by the Rural White Paper in 2000, which marked a watershed for policy on rural services. It introduced a range of new and useful measures, such as the Rural Services Standard, which gives people in rural areas an indication of what services they should be able to expect. So far, however, it has missed the opportunity to encourage rural service providers to maximise their own potential by looking to the wider community and identifying how they can best meet local needs.

CPRE believes that Government action is needed to:

- > help identify and oversee new opportunities for increased joint working between different service providers in rural areas, for example through shared or mobile facilities, so that services can be provided in an efficient and sustainable way;
- > encourage greater co-ordination and planning of services through community strategies, local strategic partnerships and town and village plans, which can identify how services could better meet local needs;
- > ensure local authorities undertake accessibility planning which examines the access different communities have to a range of services. Local Transport Plans should also consider the potential for bringing services to rural settlements as well as looking at improved public transport;
- > make sure service planners and providers recognise the wider value of providing public services in rural areas. The significant transfer of costs to rural communities (in terms of travel, unequal access and traffic) that results from service closures should be considered when making decisions about the allocation, location and funding of services;
- > extend the presumption against closure of rural services (currently for rural schools and post offices) to other essential services; and
- > improve the status of the Rural Services Standard across Government so there is greater recognition and take up.

*DEFRA, The way ahead for rural services: a guide to good practice in locating rural services, 2002*

*Sustain and East Anglia Food Link, Good Food on the Public Plate: sustainability in public sector food and catering, 2003*

## **What you can do?**

CPRE alongside other organisations like ViRSA (the Village Retail Services Association) are campaigning to retain and enhance local services. But you can help too.

- > Anyone with a basic bank account or some types of current account<sup>1</sup> can obtain their money at the post office, bringing more revenue to their post office every time they transact. Details of which accounts are eligible can be found in your local post office. If your account is not eligible, write to your bank and complain.
- > In any review of your local or structure plan, aim to include a policy which discourages the change of use of existing rural service premises (such as pubs, post offices, shops) from business to residential use.
- > If you are faced with a proposed development, such as a supermarket, which may decrease the viability of local shops and services, get hold of a copy of CPRE's *Mapping Local Food Webs* publication, which shows how to calculate its effect on local businesses and the community.
- > Encourage organisations in your area to source locally, for example, serving local food in local schools. According to SUSTAIN, if establishments such as schools, hospitals and prison canteens across the country were to use local food it would give a £5 billion boost to local economies, creating many local jobs.

*1. You can use the post office to access the following current accounts: Alliance & Leicester, Barclays, Cahoot, Clydesdale, Co-operative, Lloyds TSB, Nationwide Building Society, and Smile. Cash can also be withdrawn from around 11 basic bank accounts in England via the Post Office.*

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