

Homeless Link Rural homelessness project

Supporting homelessness agencies to deliver services in rural areas



Executive Summary



About Homeless Link

Homeless Link is the national membership organisation for frontline homelessness agencies in England. Our mission is to be a catalyst that will help to bring an end to homelessness.

Our two goals are to:

- raise standards in the services that support homeless people and tackle homelessness
- influence the development of policy, strategy and investment at all levels of government.

Homeless Link's member organisations provide services through: hostels, day centres, outreach and resettlement agencies, housing advice centres, youth projects, health projects, welfare rights groups, regional and sub-regional homelessness networks, refuges, drug and alcohol services and church groups.

Acknowledgements

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Front cover: www.freeimages.co.uk

The full report is available from Homeless Link's website www.homeless.org.uk

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Introduction

Homeless Link's rural homelessness research is part of a one-year project, funded by Capacity Builders, focussing on agencies working in rural areas. The findings of the research will influence the development of capacity building support for agencies working with homeless people, or people at risk of homelessness in rural areas.

As this report shows, the social and political context in which agencies operate affects their ability to support homeless clients. Poverty in rural areas is often dispersed in areas of relative affluence. However, up to a quarter of rural households live in poverty. There is limited affordable housing, as availability has been affected by several trends. The right-to-buy, fewer homes being built, and second-home ownership have all contributed increased pressure on housing markets.ⁱⁱ Isolation and limited service provision exacerbates social exclusion for vulnerable people in rural areas. All this combines to increase vulnerability to homelessness in rural areas. In fact, statutory homelessness has been growing faster in rural areas than in urban areas, even though overall levels of homelessness acceptances are still lower in rural areas.ⁱⁱⁱ

Existing research of primarily non-statutory homeless groups has shown that, despite similarities in clients' support needs in rural and urban areas^{iv}, agencies supporting homeless people in rural areas operate under different circumstances, e.g. having to cover more dispersed areas with limited service availability.^v To ensure that capacity building caters to their needs, more clarity around the issues that they face, and whether the support they need differs from other services, was needed.

Survey

In the spring of 2007 we sent an electronic questionnaire to 199 agencies working with homeless people in rural areas, and received 48 responses. This was complemented by in-depth interviews with 14 agencies across the English regions. Agencies surveyed included large and small providers, offering a range of services including accommodation, floating support and advice and assistance. Respondents came from across England, ranging from Cornwall in the south to Northumberland in the north.

The survey focused on:

- clarifying the barriers to working with homeless people, and people at risk of homelessness, in rural areas
- identifying how agencies have responded to try to overcome those barriers.
- giving agencies an opportunity to influence the focus of the capacity building support, by specifying the support they need.

Key findings

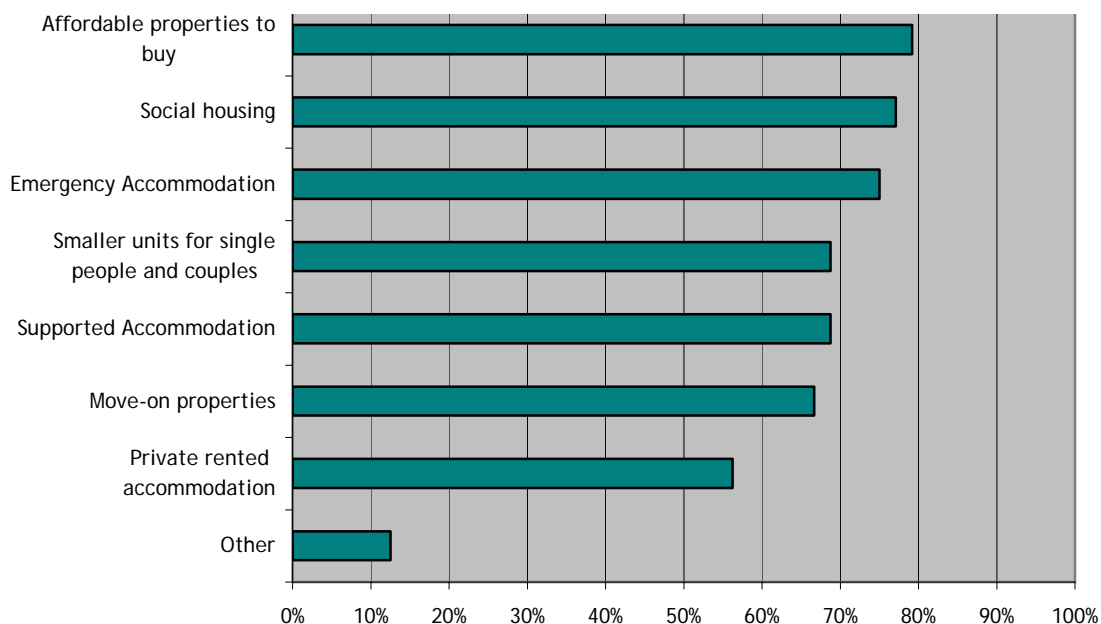
Barriers to working with homeless people in rural areas

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which different barriers to delivering services to homeless people in rural areas affected them.

The lack of appropriate and affordable accommodation was the most important barrier to the agencies we surveyed. All respondents agreed that this was an issue, and almost half saw the development of affordable housing as the single most important thing that would help their service delivery.

'The loss of affordable housing to Right to Buy and the high concentration of second home ownership in rural areas has put massive pressure on social and private housing. This causes problems for all sectors but particularly the young and homeless. The only real solution is to build more affordable housing.'

Table 1: Percentage of respondents reporting a lack of different types of accommodation



Ninety-six per cent of agencies found that the lack of recognition of the level of need in rural areas - due to the hidden nature of homelessness^{vi} - was a barrier to working. In interviews many agencies stressed that street counts and statutory figures significantly underestimate numbers of homeless people in rural areas.

'The Council placed a housing officer in xxx offering five mornings per week for appointments, and the Council were shocked at how oversubscribed the service was, and [wondered] where did all these homeless people come from! These people had previously not been recorded and so had not existed before!'

Eighty-three per cent of respondents agreed that it costs more to deliver services in rural areas. Often this relates to covering large geographical areas, which adds to travel costs. Related to this, issues with transport, both for clients and staff, were reported by two thirds of respondents.

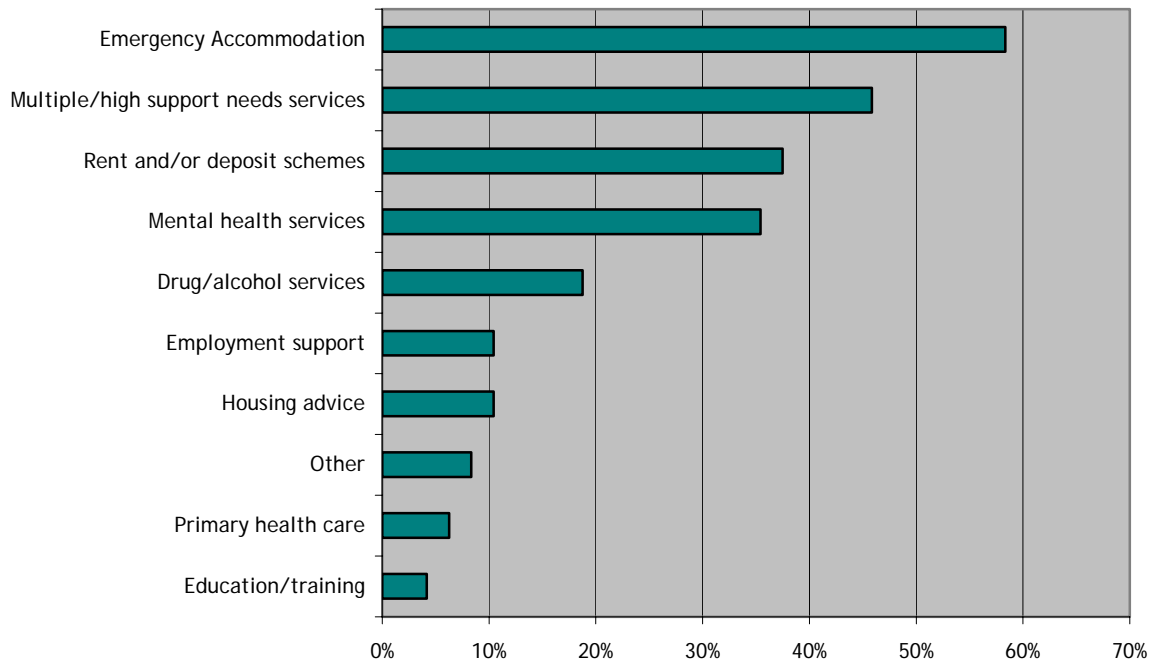
Table 2: Barriers to delivering services to homeless people in rural areas

Barrier to working with homeless people in rural areas	Percentage of respondents	
	strongly agree/ agree	strongly disagree/ disagree
Funding/Costs		
It costs more to deliver services in rural areas	83%	4%
We have difficulties accessing adequate funding	61%	10%
We find it difficult to engage with funders' procurement and commissioning processes	57%	13%
Statutory provision		
There are restrictions on our clients accessing services in other authority areas	58%	6%
The local authority's advice and assistance does not meet homeless people's needs	73%	8%
Housing		
There is a lack of, or limited access to, appropriate and affordable accommodation in our area.	100%	0%
Access to services		
Difficulties with transport impact on our service	71%	6%
We cannot access specialist support for our clients (e.g. services for multiple/high support needs)	69%	17%
Access to services for homeless people is limited (e.g. unsuitable opening hours, nominations and allocations policies are unclear and exclude certain groups)	59%	15%
Clients are unwilling to relocate to access services	59%	6%
It is difficult to make potential clients aware of the service.	35%	31%
Staff and service delivery		
We find it difficult to recruit and/or retain staff with the appropriate skills	29%	50%
Staff face difficulties associated with lone working	54%	27%
We find it difficult to evaluate/measure the effectiveness of our service delivery	23%	52%
We do not hear about the opportunities available	25%	37%
Lack of understanding		
We face opposition to our project and/or client group from the local community	48%	37%
There is a lack of recognition of the level of need in rural areas due to the hidden nature of homelessness.	96%	0%

When asked what they would change, if they could only change one thing, 29 per cent of agencies wanted a new local service developed, e.g. a hostel or a rent deposit scheme. Related to this, issues with access to specialist services was a barrier to working for over two thirds - most commonly difficulties accessing emergency accommodation and services for multiple/high support needs. More specifically, nearly three quarters of respondents agreed that local authority advice and assistance to homeless people fail to meet their needs, e.g. no provision for non-priority homeless (67 per cent), no full assessment of need (40 per cent) or inadequate advice (42 per cent). Almost 60 per cent of respondents also reported that there are restrictions on clients accessing services in other local authority areas.

‘Local authorities have tough government targets to meet and we have noticed a large discrepancy in what housing advice is given to clients. XXX and XXX councils are particularly bad at admitting a duty to house and often people are fobbed off who have a real right to social housing under current legislation. It is vital to have an independent advice service that can take on an advocacy role for people’

Table 3: Specialist support services that are difficult to access in rural areas



The findings suggest that agencies feel that the local context, e.g. lack of affordable accommodation in their area, influenced their capacity to assist homeless people, more than organisational issues, e.g. recruitment difficulties.

- Half of respondents did not have issues with recruiting and retaining staff with the adequate skills (50 per cent), or with evaluating and/or measuring the effectiveness of their service delivery (52 per cent).
- Over a third of respondents disagreed that finding out about opportunities available to them was difficult (38 per cent) or that their project or client group faced opposition from the local community (38 per cent).

This suggests that the support needed is therefore likely to vary from organisation to organisation, and individualised one-to-one support, based on good practice elsewhere, will have to be developed to respond to specific needs.

Overcoming the barriers to working in rural areas

Agencies have developed many ways of overcoming the difficulties of delivering services in rural areas. Specific good practice examples are highlighted in the full research report and on our website. Overall, partnership working and the use of information and communications technology (ICT) were the most common ways in which agencies had sought to overcome the barriers they faced. Around 40 per cent of agencies also stressed information sharing; developing local services; monitoring, evaluation and evidencing need; and lobbying and/or networking with statutory and other funders, as key ways in which they had sought to overcome barriers.

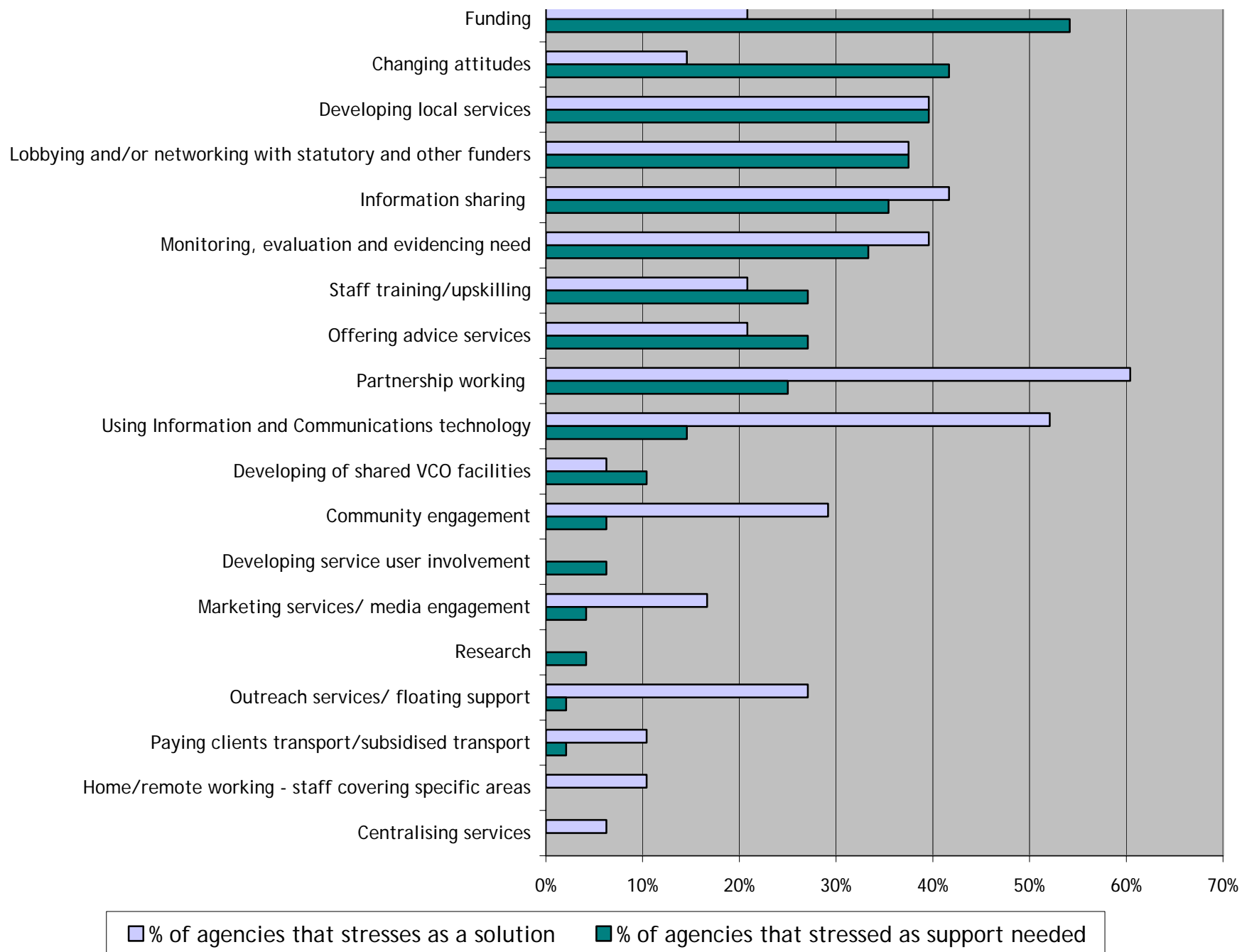
'We have linked up with the CAB and a local language interpretation college to provide a telephone helpline and four outreach surgeries per week to reach the most socially excluded groups in society and for whom many have difficulty in accessing independent advice. It is a good partnership which offers the specialisms of the two organisations.'

What support do rural agencies want?

Often, one agency's solution was another agency's support need, i.e. - organisations had either developed information sharing; local services; systems for monitoring, evaluation and evidencing need; lobbying and/or networking with the statutory sector and other funders - or they wanted help to develop in these areas.

The issues highlighted here - and the main barriers to delivering services in rural areas identified above - suggest that the support agencies want from second tier organisations often centres around representation and lobbying. Influencing attitudes and impacting on decision-making processes was important. Yet, although partnership working is a common way of addressing barriers to working, many agencies are still not linked in to strategic decision-making bodies.

Table 4: top solutions to issues and support needed to overcome barriers reported by agencies working with homeless people in rural areas



Participation in local strategic fora

Forum	Number of respondents participating	Percentage of respondents
Homelessness fora	28	58%
Local Strategic Partnerships	24	50%
Supporting People fora	22	46%
Local Area Agreements	17	35%
Other	14	29%

The figures show that over 40 per cent of agencies are still not linked in with their local homelessness forum. One respondent specifically stated that there was no homeless forum in place yet. However, although half of respondents were involved in Local Strategic Partnerships, only just over a third of respondents engaged with Local Areas Agreements. This could have serious implications when Supporting People funding moves into being managed by Local Area Agreements.^{vii} However, this would not just be a rural issue, but important for all homelessness agencies.

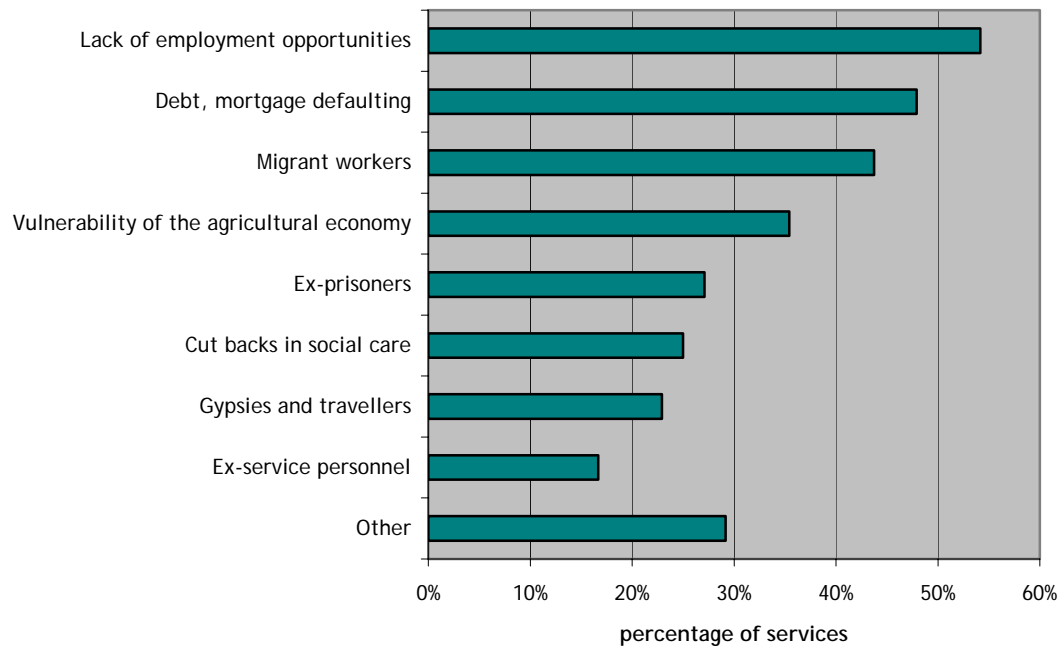
Wider social and political context

When speaking to rural agencies in the initial interview stage of the research project, a number of them reported broader social and political issues that affect their capacity to deliver services to clients. We asked respondents to indicate whether any wider issues affected them. Their responses give us an indication of some of the broader trends affecting agencies working in rural areas. However, respondents were not asked to elaborate on *how* these issues affected their services and thus further research would be needed to gather a more detailed picture of the specific impact that they are having.

Overall, the lack of employment opportunities was the biggest issue stressed by over half of respondents. This was closely followed by issues with debt/ mortgage defaulting (48 per cent) and issues relating to migrant workers (44 per cent).

'The whole [issue] of homelessness in a rural context is fraught with challenges because the rural economy is so volatile. The impact of migrant workers cannot be underestimated, but the other side to that is that many indigenous people were unwilling to work in [the sectors that employ migrant labour]. However, employment opportunities in rural areas are quite poor, with much seasonal and casual work being on offer, often on low wages. Opportunities for further and higher education rely on travelling to larger centres on expensive public transport. There are often high indices of alcohol and substance misuse, which are not always accepted or believed.'

Table 5: Social and political issues affecting services



The findings suggest that there is no generic ‘rural’ context within which agencies operate. Although there are particular issues, such as the vulnerability of the agricultural community, which are specific to rural areas, these issues do not come to the fore for all agencies. Issues with specific populations, such as migrant workers, gypsies and travellers, ex service personnel, or ex-prisoners, will be affected by the demographic of these groups locally. For example, certain areas (notably Lincolnshire, the Wash, Yorkshire and Herefordshire) have much higher concentrations of migrant workers and numbers are more likely to be influenced by seasonal patterns (Commission for Rural Communities, 2007a).^{viii} Similarly, areas with a prison or military base locally are more likely to be affected by ex-service personnel and ex-prisoners. However, the sample was not large enough to establish any clear geographical patterns.

Recommendations

Rural proofing

In developing new services and policies CLG, Office for the Third Sector, Housing Corporation, Regional Planning bodies, Local authorities, and infrastructure organisations should ensure that they are 'rural proofed'.^{ix} This involves:

- **Awareness - consider how the groups or individuals you are trying to target may be different in rural areas.** This may involve considering the differences in demographic make-up or the dispersed nature of populations, lack of service provision, higher delivery costs etc.
- **Accessibility - can the groups or individuals you are trying reach with your policy or service access it or benefit from it?** Consider for example whether there is affordable and accessible transport to the services you are planning; whether you will reach who you want it to reach with your proposed method of dissemination.
- **Applicability - will the policy or service you are proposing, work in rural areas?** For example, are the services you propose to use to deliver support available in rural areas? Will you be able to reach the individuals you want to reach? What would it cost to deliver the policy or service in a rural area?

If in doubt, consult with agencies and individuals in rural areas that will be affected by what you propose to develop.

Capacity building - Supporting rural service development

- To develop the capacity of individual agencies, **personalised support** from infrastructure organisations is likely to be most effective, as different agencies will need to develop different elements of their service. Important areas for capacity building include fundraising, lobbying and networking.
- **Accessible resources** to share successful ways of working should be developed, including models of partnership working; using ICT; information sharing; and evaluating, monitoring and evidencing need.
- **Increased participation in local decision-making fora** by rural agencies should be strongly encouraged. Organisers of strategic decision-making fora should ensure that they are accessible to rural agencies in terms of location and time. Agencies must prioritise participation in strategic decision-making fora to ensure that they have a voice locally. Sharing responsibility for attending meetings and feeding back to colleagues could be a way for smaller agencies to overcome time and resource constraints.

Gathering and joining up information and services

- Statutory homelessness data and street counts will not reveal the true level of need in rural areas. Local authorities, voluntary sector providers and other local services (e.g. health, education) must work together to **profile homelessness and housing need in their areas** by alternative means, including profiling clients accessing services.^x
- More work to **develop links between homelessness agencies and specialised agencies** working with migrant workers, prisoners/ex-prisoners, gypsies and travellers and ex-service personnel should be developed in areas where these groups affect services. The NCVO, local CVS and other generic infrastructure organisations will be best placed to lead on this.
- More research is needed to **explore the wider social and political issues** that impact on homelessness services in rural areas. Specifically, the relationship between homelessness and debt, migrant workers, and the lack of employment in rural areas should be explored.

Increased resources for rural areas

- The Housing Corporation, Regional Housing Boards, the CLG, and local authority planners need to combine forces to ensure the delivery of **more affordable accommodation** in rural areas, the first steps of which should be to implement the recommendations of the Affordable Rural Housing Commission (2006). Clear targets for rural affordable housing development should be included in regional planning.
- Affordable housing developed should include **properties to rent**, including social housing, as home-ownership is not suitable for all groups, and **smaller units** for single people and couples.
- Local and regional commissioning and procurement processes should recognise the **additional cost of service delivery in rural areas** (e.g. increased travel costs, smaller client case loads) and ensure full cost recovery.
- **Access to services**, especially emergency accommodation and support for clients with multiple needs, **should be improved** for homeless people in rural areas. Local solutions may vary but can include:
 - Agreed referral pathways into support services in neighbouring areas
 - Cross authority service development based on joint needs assessments
 - Alternative models of service delivery (such as more dispersed projects, e.g. lodgings schemes and Nightstop services)
 - Improving throughput in existing emergency accommodation by developing move-on.^{xi}

ⁱ The government's agreed definition of rurality broadly equates to settlements with a population of less than 10,000. Under this definition 9.52 million people live in rural England (Commission for Rural Communities, 2006b, p.11). Using this definition 73 local authorities (LAs) are defined as more than 80 per cent rural and 44 of those are 100 per cent rural [See DEFRA (2005) for a full list]. We focussed our research on identifying agencies working with homelessness in these LAs. However, we also welcomed agencies based in other rural areas, or who served rural areas (even though based in urban settings), to participate in the research, and tried to disseminate information about the project as widely as possible, using national and regional infrastructure organisations with links in rural areas, to ensure that further contacts were made.

ⁱⁱ Affordable Rural Housing Commission (2006) *Final Report*, London: Affordable Rural Housing Commission p.10

ⁱⁱⁱ Commission for Rural Communities (2006) *Rural Disadvantage: Reviewing the evidence*, London: Commission for Rural Communities, p.64

^{iv} Evans, A. (1999) *They think I don't exist: the hidden nature of rural homelessness*, Crisis: London; Robinson, D. & Coward, S (2003) *Your Place, Not Mine: the experiences of homeless people staying with family and friends*, London: Crisis; Blythe, H. (2006) *The stigma of Rural Homelessness in Wales*, Cardiff: Wallich Clifford

^v Countryside Agency (2002) *Preventing homelessness in the countryside... what works?: A guide for local authorities and the voluntary sector demonstrating effective practice*, Cheltenham: Countryside Agency

^{vi} Evans, A. (1999) *They think I don't exist: the hidden nature of rural homelessness*, Crisis: London, p.5

^{vii} To find out more about Local Area Agreements and their impact on homelessness services go to: <http://www.homeless.org.uk/policyandinfo/policyandinfo/issues/laacurrent>

^{viii} Commission for Rural Communities (2007a) CRC Briefing Paper Migrant Workers in Rural Areas. Cheltenham: Commission for Rural Communities

^{ix} NCVO's *Access All Areas* (Grieve, 2007), www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/ruralproofing, is a useful guide to rural proofing and also highlights other resources available on the topic.

^x Existing models include Homeless Watch developed in Nottinghamshire, more information is available at: www.hlg.org.uk/

^{xi} Homeless Link has developed a move on plans protocol (MOPP), which is designed to help local authorities and service providers address local factors preventing effective move on. The protocol is based around local partnership; a move on audit; the development of a move on action plan; and regular analysis of progress and results.



Frontline agencies in partnership

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