

# Rural Development Sub-committee

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## Paper from Welsh Local Government Association on key issues in relation to inquiry into poverty and deprivation in rural Wales

### Role of WLGA Rural Forum

1. On 30<sup>th</sup> November 2007 the Full Council of the WLGA agreed to the establishment of a new WLGA Rural Forum. This step now formally acknowledges the important status of rural affairs within the Association and allows us to explore those matters, whether socio-economic, demographic, cultural and so on, which may play out differently in rural areas. The purpose of the WLGA's Rural Forum is:

to provide a local government forum for exchanging views on key issues affecting rural Wales (Rural Wales is defined as encompassing the following unitary authority areas: Powys, Ceredigion, Gwynedd, Denbighshire, Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire, Monmouthshire, Conwy, and the Isle of Anglesey);

to provide a co-ordinated approach to key strategic issues affecting local authorities in rural Wales;

to identify items of common concern and to discuss ways of addressing them in co-operation;

to co-ordinate "lobbying" / representational actions on issues of common concern to achieve better outcomes for the communities and people of rural Wales;

to identify potential areas of collaboration and joint work for the benefit of rural areas;

where possible, to speak with one voice for and represent the interests of local authorities in rural Wales;

to undertake such other collaborative discussions about rural Wales as are agreed to be appropriate, to further the economic, social and environmental well-being of rural areas.

2. The WLGA Rural Forum includes leading local politicians of the councils seeking to serve the population of rural Wales who have first hand information on how Assembly Government policies impact on rural Wales. The aim of the WLGA Rural Forum is to promote actions aimed at sustaining rural communities.

3. The first meeting of the Rural Forum took place on the 7<sup>th</sup> March 2008. The Welsh Assembly Government Minister for Rural Affairs, Elin Jones AM, addressed the Forum and a very constructive discussion was had with her on some key issues. As a result the following actions are now being taken forward:

a commitment for close working between the Minister and the WLGA Rural Forum on issues such as the development and monitoring of an Annual Rural Statement or Priority Plan for Rural Wales and effective rural proofing of policies;

the Minister intends to commence a discussion with Cabinet colleagues about effective rural proofing of policies;

on-going discussions are taking place between the Minister and her Cabinet colleagues regarding the range of funding formulas used by the Welsh Assembly Government, which, due to their weighting attached to 'population size' favour urban areas; and

Chief Executives of the rural local authorities to establish key priorities for the future work of the Forum.

4. The WLGA Rural Forum will be meeting formally twice a year, with the next meeting scheduled for Friday 17<sup>th</sup> October. The Minister indicated that she welcomed that and would be happy to attend. In the meantime officers are considering organising a Forum event during the Royal Welsh Show in order to raise its profile.

### Costs of delivering services in Rural Areas

#### Rural Premium

5. The costs of providing local authority services in rural Wales are higher and to an extent this is recognised by WAG in terms of the settlement and dispersion indicators used to take account of the additional time and distance costs associated with service delivery to dispersed communities. For example, waste has to be transported for greater distances before it can be disposed of; Social Care and Health staff has to travel significant distances between clients.

6. However, although the costs of providing services in rural areas is recognised to an extent by some in WAG, this is not recognised or understood universally across the board by policy and decision makers.

7. Prices also tend to be higher in rural areas. This is partly a reflection of transport costs to deliver goods and services to a widely dispersed and low density population in rural areas, but it is also partly due to the lack of competition.

8. In relation to increases in road fuel costs, those living, working and providing services in rural areas are hostage to fortune; any

increase in fuel cost simply has to be absorbed and other things have to go by the wayside as a result of this critical dependence.

9. The rural local authorities believe that the various funding formulas used by the Welsh Assembly Government take insufficient account of the extra costs of delivering services in sparsely populated environments. Equally it is believed that the measures used do not recognise the demands created by the rural poor who may be dispersed in such a way as not to be picked by deprivation indicators. As a result, wherever possible, responsibility for delivery should be decentralised to ensure that the needs of rural communities are fully taken into account, and the community leadership role of local authorities reinforced.

## **Impact of additional costs of providing services in Rural Areas**

### **Restricted access to basic services and facilities**

10. Restricted, partial or no access to services, are the most commonly quoted drawbacks of living in a predominantly rural area. The public have to travel a long way to access services, which is inconvenient and expensive in terms of high levels of car ownership and escalating costs of fuel.

11. There is also the problem faced by authorities who have to take their services to the public - high costs associated with transport, 'down time' between visits, the need to maintain large numbers of peripatetic staff and maintaining outreach facilities. Recruitment of specialist officers can also be very difficult.

12. These issues are not only evidenced across rural Wales but in rural communities across all nations and regions in the UK. For example, a report published on the UK Government's Department of Communities and Local Government website in March demonstrated that nearly half of all neighbourhoods in England have lost key amenities such as GP surgeries, post offices, shops, schools and pubs in the last four years. It found that 45% of neighbourhoods in England have become more "geographically deprived" during that period thus the distances residents must travel to use everyday basic services has increased, due in large part to closures.

13. The most worrying manifestation of this problem is in relation to emergencies; the public are at higher risks due to the time taken for emergency services to reach them, and the time taken to travel those distances, which can be considerable, to reach appropriate medical facilities.

14. Choices are limited in terms of goods and services on offer.

### **Main poverty and deprivation issues affecting people living in Rural Wales**

15. Deprivation and Poverty in rural Wales tends to be hidden or dispersed in isolated pockets rather than concentrated thus is not captured by measures such as the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation.

### **How local government is tackling these issues? How WAG and others can support this?**

16. Anti-poverty and deprivation activities are best addressed when everyone works together to address them. What is vital is that there is a clear strategy and direction of travel with all partners understanding their contribution to reducing poverty and deprivation.

17. WAG needs to provide and demonstrate national strategic leadership and direction that enables others to act and provide a context that encourages collaboration and joint working. It needs to work closely with the UK Government on poverty and deprivation issues as many of the policy and delivery levers that need to be acted upon rests with the UK Government, not least the benefits system. WAG also has a significant role in terms of ensuring that there is sufficient funding in place to fulfil its policy aspirations.

18. Current WAG policies do not always adequately address the needs of rural areas. There is a need for better understanding and recognition of the issues that face rural areas that require different solutions to address them. WAG fails to recognise the need for different approaches and solutions in different areas. For example, the current blanket approach to service delivery fails to recognise and address the needs of rural areas. The emphasis on providing minimum standards and minimum entitlements provide a real challenge for rural areas. There is a real need to both recognise and identify the additional financial burden of providing services in rural areas, and to allow local authorities the flexibility to innovate and design services and interventions which meet the specific needs of people living in rural areas.

19. Local authorities are an important partner in demonstrating local leadership and enabling partnership working at the local level. Given the role of local authorities as community leaders, articulating a vision for the local area, and as providers of key services, a number of solutions to tackling poverty and deprivation are best dealt with locally, within the wider strategic context set by WAG. Local authorities have for many years prioritised the need to tackle poverty and deprivation and more recently the Strategy for Older People and the Rights into Action agenda have ensured that issues of poverty affecting children and young people and older people are addressed as a corporate issue affecting many aspects of local government policy and direct service delivery.

20. Organisations in the community and voluntary sectors also have a key role to play as they are often close to the local issues on the ground and key organisations such as credit unions and the citizen advice bureau have an important role in the delivery of solutions to address the issues. By all interested parties working together, aligning priority areas of work for action, concerted efforts and positive outcomes can be achieved in reducing deprivation and eradicating poverty.

## **Summary of key messages/recommendations**

Effective rural proofing of all WAG policies and initiatives ensuring the impact of new policies on rural areas is considered and appropriately reflected

Further discussions with WAG on the rural premium issue and full recognition of additional costs of providing services in rural areas

A review of the Wales Index of Multiple Deprivation to ensure it is an effective tool in identifying levels of deprivation in rural areas

A longer term strategic approach to rural regeneration

Further consideration of the need for a specific programme to address the issues raised in our written evidence and other issues affecting rural Wales