Toolkit for Rural Communities
Tackling Rural Isolation and Developing Community Based Services

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1. Introduction

Mendip is a rural District made up of 5 market towns and the rural areas around them. Its culture and outlook is derived largely from its rural roots. There are close links between the market towns and countryside. Historically, agriculture underpinned the local economy and much of the area’s culture is derived from these associations. The area has a distinctive character and many of its towns and villages retain a strong sense of independence and self reliance.

Many of Mendip’s smaller communities face challenges as a result of their geographical location and in an era of reducing local government resources and emphasis on community self help, there are a number of “devolution” initiatives that encourage communities to work together to secure the services they need in ways that are most appropriate to local circumstances. This represents both a challenge, in that conventional services may disappear and an opportunity in that new tools are being developed to enable communities to decide what services they need, and provide for them.

Parish Councils and community groups are central to this process and have a strong focus on their locality and in-depth local knowledge. However, developing local community based provision requires a significant shift in the way that Parish Council’s and community groups work.

This toolkit aims to provide help to communities in developing a new approach to local service provision. It will focus on grassroots services that tackle the problems of rural isolation early on and prevent acute problems from developing, reducing the need for more formal service interventions by public agencies.

This approach requires a significant shift in the culture of the organisations involved and willingness by the community to lead the development of local action and take on new roles and responsibilities. The level of partnership working required is also new to many of the agencies involved and requires a focus on locality.

The toolkit will work alongside Council initiatives to enhance its community leadership role, and in particular the opportunities generated by the development of a multi-agency “hub” at Shepton Mallet. It will draw on the experience of the community in Coleford setting up TheHub@Coleford.
2. The Toolkit

The Toolkit suggests some ways in which a rural community might start to tackle some of the issues caused by rural isolation in an era of public spending cuts.

The cost of providing formal public services in rural areas tends to be higher due to the dispersed nature of the population. Rural deprivation also tends to be hidden. In recent years much of the work undertaken by both local and national government to alleviate poverty and deprivation has been directed to areas which show concentrations of deprivation. Only 2% of these areas are in the rural parts of the country. Recent statistics show that 17% of individuals in rural areas suffer poverty and deprivation, only just below the urban figure of 19%. People experiencing deprivation tend to be dispersed amongst a more affluent population. However, those who are experiencing deprivation tend to be multiply deprived in rural areas, with difficulty accessing housing, work, transport, education and other services reinforcing their problems.

The toolkit suggests ways that local community action can bring ground level services into the rural areas, even when public agencies have withdrawn to larger population centres on the grounds of cost. Its focus is very much on preventing people falling into multiple deprivation and on early intervention at community level.

3. First steps – framing the issues

The community needs first to find a way of defining and agreeing the issues which are most pressing in their area. This discussion should be based on the locality, bringing together all the different needs and service providers across the area and looking at the community as a whole. Public agencies may have a tendency to look at a single (or several) issues over a wider area of service delivery. The local community will intuitively understand the interactions between issues in a locality.

Methods that can be used to frame the issues include;

- Local residents forum
- Local service providers forum
- Analysis of official statistics
- Local survey
- Parish plan
• LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

In Coleford the process started with the Parish Plan group, who had recently prepared a Parish Plan which identified a number of issues in the village. The Parish Plan group formed a second group to look specifically at rural isolation. It then held a forum meeting for all service providers in the village and local residents. The forum included the local doctors practice, the school, the children’s centre, numerous community groups, CAB, and local residents. The group also made use of the statistical profile of the area produced by Somerset information network. Community profiles are available for Wards in Somerset at www.informsomerset.org.uk.

4. Issues of Concern
The following issues are commonly of concern in rural areas, and together contribute to rural isolation and in some cases multiple deprivation for vulnerable residents. However, each locality is unique and other issues may be important.

All of these issues were identified in the work in Coleford.
- Challenges faced by young people
- Challenges faced by older people
- Access and travel
- Access to employment
- Access to health care
- Social exclusion

Access to housing is another major concern for rural communities, but is not part of this toolkit. Information about rural housing in Mendip can be found at www.mendip.gov.uk/evidencebasepopulation.

4.1 Challenges faced by young people
Somerset Rural Youth Project recently published a report “Rurality and Young People” for SCC’s Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (2015). It was based on a series of focus groups with 16 – 24 years old living in rural Somerset and focussed on quality of life issues for this age group.

The 3 issues that caused young people to most concern were lack of transport, lack of services such as shops and facilities and poor broadband and/or mobile.
Transport to work and leisure opportunities is a particular issue for young people, as they are less likely to drive or have access to a car than older people. The study found that where buses do exist, they are felt to be unreliable and inflexible, limiting access to work and limiting choice of training and education opportunities.

Broadband and mobile limitations also affect this age group particularly badly, as most of the young people surveyed were either regularly or constantly using digital devices. Poor speeds and reception were felt to limit access and in some cases to have an effect on school work.

An earlier report by Somerset Rural Youth Project “A Place to Hang Out” 2012, identified a need for informal spaces for recreation for young people and a need to have somewhere to meet. Young people had a preference for an informal space such as a club or cafe, but also valued the support available from staff at youth clubs. The report also suggests that young people were feeling disenfranchised from local communities and questioning their role in rural society.

4.2 Challenges faced by older people
Age uk has identified social isolation as a major factor affecting older people and has been found to have an effect on health as serious as well recognised risk factors such as smoking. Whilst loneliness and isolation are not the same thing isolation does increase the risk of loneliness and its related health effects. Age UK has called on Government to focus on tackling social isolation of older people (Age UK, Later Life in Rural England 2013). Providing opportunities for older people to participate in their local communities can prevent the need for care in the future. Volunteer led services and group activities are particularly useful in increasing social participation.

4.3 Access and travel
Both young people and older people are particularly affected by access and travel difficulties, as both groups are less likely to be able to drive or have their own transport. Nationally 41% of Local Authorities have made cuts to subsidised bus services (Age Uk, Later Life in rural England 2013) and cuts have had to be made in Somerset, affecting some Mendip services. For older age groups, lack of public transport is a particular issue in accessing hospitals and other health care outside the District. Access difficulties and the need to make multiple trips to hospital can have an impact on health. If access to higher order health care services is difficult
this may result in opportunities to prevent a deterioration in health being lost and acute care needs arising later on.

Lack of access to public transport also particularly affects younger people’s access to employment and education/training.

Whilst mobile and broadband have the potential to provide better services to rural areas, poor broadband speeds and mobile reception are common, making access to online services more difficult in rural areas. With increasing reliance of public services on online communication and the introduction of universal credit as a largely online service, the impact of this lack of access on rural communities will continue to grow in significance.

4.4 Access to employment
Access to employment, education and training can be difficult for anyone without private transport. Even where journey to work bus services exist, they can be inflexible and many villages do not have a service that lends itself to working hours. Villages across Somerset have lost services in the last few months as subsidies have had to be withdrawn due to funding cuts at County Council level.

This is a particular problem for young people just starting out in the world of work and those returning to work after a period of unemployment or a break. These groups are less likely to have the resources to provide private transport and this can lead to a circular problem, whereby people cannot travel to employment and therefore cannot afford to provide transport and therefore cannot access employment. It also means that those on low incomes have to buy a car which they cannot really afford and this can adversely affect the whole household.

Homeworking is an increasing trend in the rural areas, and this has the potential to improve people’s access to the world of work. However, this depends of reasonable broadband speeds and access to suitable equipment. Broadband speeds can be a particular problem in some villages and this is certainly the case in Coleford.

4.5 Access to health provision
Coleford is lucky enough to have a Doctors surgery and pharmacy in the village. However, many villages do not have this type of facility and people must travel to
the nearest town to access services. In the absence of a bus service or for anyone not able to use the bus, this means a taxi ride.

Even in villages lucky enough to have a surgery, issues remain around access to hospitals, where all the options are at some distance, and around community level provision supporting healthy lifestyle choices, where few facilities are available. In Mendip higher order health provision is all outside the District, in Bath, Bristol, Yeovil or Taunton.

Community level provision to support healthy lifestyles is important in preventing ill health. This can be as simple as an older persons lunch club, a fitness class or diet club.

4.6 Social exclusion
Social exclusion can be the result of financial exclusion. It can also result from isolation.

Age Uk, in its report on later life in rural England shows that people in rural areas experience the same problems of financial exclusion as in urban areas, but in rural areas living costs tend to be higher, transport is poor and there can sometimes be limited social networks. Living costs are typically 10-20% higher in rural areas and 20% of children live in households below the poverty threshold after housing costs.

Issues around a lack of social networks are best tackled at community level, by generating opportunities for social interaction and building communities in the locality. These opportunities should be low cost and accessible to the whole community.

5. The Approach in Coleford
In Coleford it was decided to focus on creating a multi purpose community hub which would act as a venue for the delivery of community based services in the village. The group works with public agencies and as a community group to facilitate both out-reach by the agencies and targeted community action. The hub aims to:

- Provide a venue that agencies can use for outreach
- Develop community level services that meet identified needs in the village
The hub has hosted events for Mendip District Council, Aster Housing and the local school, and holds a regular surgery with the police PCSO.

The hub is tackling the following issues:

- **Young People:** The weekly youth club provides support to young people, allowing a point of contact with agencies that can help if necessary. The club also provides an opportunity for social interaction and worthwhile activities.

- **Older people:** The weekly lunch club for older people provides a point of social contact and an opportunity for public agencies to interact on an occasional basis.

- **Access and travel:** There are plans for a volunteer car scheme based at the hub. This will initially be to bring vulnerable people unable to travel by other means to the hub, but will also look at providing transport further afield.

- **Access to employment:** The hub offers wifi, and there are plans to create a business hub, with access to computers, occasional training and facilities for homeworkers. The business hub will offer support to homeworkers, who might otherwise be isolated and help for those wishing to return to work.

- **Access to health provision:** The hub has sought out fitness and other health related providers, as no help with fitness was available in the village. There is now a circuit training class and a yoga class in the hub, provided by local people on a commercial basis.

- **Social exclusion:** A Saturday morning cafe has proved very popular and is a good start in tackling social exclusion. It provides an informal drop in venue where people can meet and attracts all sections of the community.

- **Access to housing:** 28 units of affordable housing have recently been constructed in the village by a local housing association. The hub has been involved in publicising the scheme, but has not needed to seek any further affordable housing.

6. **Delivery mechanisms**

The aim of the toolkit is to enable communities to develop a response to rural isolation based on resources available within the locality. It is therefore important that any initiative is self financing and sustainable within the community in the long term. This means that any initiative will need to generate at least some income.
In Coleford this has been achieved by renting space at The Hub to private users. This includes private hire for functions such as birthday parties and Christenings. It also includes hire to business users. By careful management of business bookings, the hub has been able to attract a range of regular paying users who offer services that help in tackling some of the issues resulting from rural isolation. This includes people running fitness classes, older people’s social events, and the Saturday morning cafe. The hub has also offered bookings to public agencies on an occasional basis, and has hosted events for Aster Housing and Mendip DC. By “working smart” in this way, the hub is able to both bring services and facilities to the village, and generate an income which is used to support services which are not able to pay, such as the youth club.

In order to facilitate the trading activities a Community Interest Company was set up. The CIC operates in the same way as a standard company, but its assets are secured for the benefit of the community. 3 directors have been appointed, who oversee the operation of The Hub. There is also a management committee, who carry out all the day to day activities involved in running the Hub. All those involved are local volunteers. A step by step guide to setting up a Community Interest Company can be found at www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-interest-companies-business-activities

In Coleford, the Hub building is currently owned by the County Council. The CIC has applied for a Community Asset Transfer and it is likely the building will be transferred by way of a long lease to the company. Somerset County council’s “Guide for Community Asset Transfers” can be found at www.somerset.gov.uk. Guidance on community asset transfers can also be found at www.mycommunity.org.uk

7. Cost savings as a result of grassroots action
The community level services provided at The Hub have a value to local people and to public agencies providing services to the community. If grassroots services can prevent acute needs arising at a later date, then overall cost savings can be achieved.

Housing Associations Charitable Trust (HACT) has developed a tool to measure the social value of early interventions across a broad range of issues. This
enables the comparison of different types of community initiatives. Any community enterprise will of course keep financial records. The HACT Social Value Calculator allows community initiatives to also keep track of their social value.

The Social Value Calculator attributes values to specific aspects of life, based on the impact it has on someone’s wellbeing. It calculates the value that people gain in terms of enhanced life satisfaction from a given activity. The values are based on a statistical analysis of four very large national UK datasets, and the figures are considered robust due to the size of the datasets used.

The Value Calculator covers things such as availability of employment, local environment, anti social behaviour, connection to neighbourhood, health, physical activity, financial inclusion, youth activities and involvement in social groups.

HACT’s report “Measuring The Social Impact Of Community Investment, A Guide to Using The Wellbeing Valuation Approach” and the attached Social Value Calculator set out a method for calculating value which is standardised, so that different projects can be compared and the organisation will offer a certification process which validates the value calculations. More details of the process can be found at www.hact.org.uk

However, the document also attributes values to social “goods” which are very relevant to the outcomes of rural isolation initiatives such as @The Hub, Coleford. Whilst the full calculation of value should only be undertaken using the method set out in the report, the monetary values give an indication of the value of this type of rural isolation project. The values represent the uplift in wellbeing the average person experiences from taking part in the activity or benefit they experience afterwards. The monetary value is the amount of cash you would have to invest to increase someone’s wellbeing by an equivalent amount. The values set out are indicative of the uplift in wellbeing to an individual participating for a whole year. In the case of @The Hub Coleford, this might include the following values;

- Youth club £2,300 per person per year
- Frequent moderate exercise £4,179 per person per year
- Frequent mild exercise £3,537 per person per year
- Member of a social group £1,850 per person per year
- No problems with anti social behaviour £6,403 per person per year
- Able to obtain advice locally £2,457 per person per year
- Feel belong to neighbourhood £3,753 per person per year
- Regular attendance at local organisation £1,773 per person per year

If a full social impact valuation is being carried out, then survey work would be required to assess some of the values. However, some can be assessed by number attending an initiative e.g. at the youth club or at fitness classes.

The social value concept has been developed to help organisations compare the value of different activities and start to recognise the monetary value of activities that improve wellbeing.

Communities involved in projects tackling rural isolation might consider carrying out a full social impact valuation to measure the improvement in the community’s wellbeing on an ongoing basis.

8. **Community Right To Challenge and Other Community Rights**

The Community Right To Challenge is one way in which communities can play a larger role in shaping and running local services. Community organisations can express an interest in running a local authority service, and the authority must then carry out a procurement exercise. However, this route may not best suit communities which are rurally isolated, and which do not already benefit from formal services. In these areas, the approach outlined above is likely to be more productive in creating services and facilities at community level which meet local needs. More details about the community right to challenge can be found at [www.mycommunity.org.uk](http://www.mycommunity.org.uk)

Community Asset Transfer involves the transfer of ownership of land or buildings from a statutory body to a community based group. In Coleford this process will allow the community to make best use of an underused building, releasing its potential to generate income and to provide a venue for services in the village. It is fundamental to the success of @TheHub, Coleford. Details can be found at [www.mycommunity.org.uk](http://www.mycommunity.org.uk)
9. Conclusions

This toolkit aims to provide a framework to guide any community wishing to tackle the impacts of rural isolation within its own area. It sets out 6 stages of development;

i. Framing the issues
ii. Gathering the community
iii. Identifying the concerns
iv. Call to community action
v. Creating the structures for delivery
vi. Measuring the outcomes.

There are numerous resources, both formal and informal to help communities with different aspects of this process. The new “localism” rights open possibilities for community action that rural areas have not had available before.

The rural isolation initiative @The Hub, Coleford provides a good example of the ways in which some of these issues have been tackled. It is a down to earth community based project, and this toolkit aims to draw out the links between these day to day activities and the overall impacts of rural isolation on a community.

The Coleford project is in its infancy, but will continue to grow and attract new users, making a difference to the lives of those in a ruraly isolated community. It is a living project and activities at The Hub are constantly evolving as the project grows and changes.