

National Standards for Community Engagement Advice Note

Remote Rural Practice

This advice note draws on discussion with practitioners who have applied the National Standards for Community Engagement in remote rural communities¹. It identifies particular issues that they feel may need to be addressed in relation to each of the Standards

Standard 1. Involvement : We will identify and involve the people and organisations with an interest in the focus of the engagement

Issues and responses for rural communities:

- *Anonymity/confidentiality and stigma:* In small places people know each other. Whilst this may have many positive aspects, where engagement addresses potentially sensitive matters such as health or poverty people are more likely to be reluctant to participate if they feel that private matters could become public. Always consider the subject matter of the engagement. If there is potential for embarrassment or stigma adopt methods that ensure confidentiality. If this issue is not addressed, legitimate and pressing needs may not be presented with the result that relatively disadvantaged members of communities lack a voice.
- *Parochialism:* All communities have local interests and concerns. The more isolated they are the less they may be exposed to and aware of trends and changes in wider society that may be relevant in their own areas, for example recognising rural racism. Community engagement may need to highlight and address unrecognised issues.
- *Need to recognise and respond to very local experience:* Whilst communities may be parochial it is equally important to recognise that they are unique. Community engagement needs to recognise that in rural areas there may be a particular tendency for local communities to have very specific local concerns, relating for example to their geographical location, character of the local economy, or cultural identity. Agencies that engage communities need to understand the particular characteristics, needs and perspectives of local people and address these in the way that they operate.

¹ For the purposes of this discussion the focus is on the two most remote classifications in the Scottish Executive (2004) Urban Rural Classification.

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/rural/seurc.pdf>

1. Remote Rural - Settlements of less than 3,000 people and with a drive time of between 30 and 60 minutes to a settlement of 10,000 or more
2. Very Remote Rural - Settlements of below 3,000 people and with a drive time of over 60 minutes to a settlement of 10,000 or more

- *'Hidden' populations and dominant cultures:* The apparently established social structure and stability that frequently characterises remote rural communities may mean that some populations may remain relatively 'invisible'. Communities may not be as homogeneous as they appear. In particular migrant workers and especially those that are transient and single may be quite detached from local culture and social networks. Similarly, people whose lifestyle is distinctly different or whose circumstances could be stigmatising within the dominant culture may be excluded, for example teenage single parents, gay people. Yet these are often populations experiencing particular stresses. Engagement needs to address who the 'hidden' populations may be, how to include them and, where more appropriate, address the particular experiences of these groups.
- *Dominant voices:* Dominant cultures are reflected in the patterns of social organisation that tend to promote recognised and respected leadership in communities. In stable communities the same people may have a consistent and dominant influence in community affairs over long periods and a degree of deference to their authority and status may be apparent. They become the gatekeepers to accessing the community. Whilst this can be very positive for the majority of the community, the constituency that these people represent may exclude the 'hidden' groups who therefore remain unrepresented. The established and dominant voices may also stifle the potential of others to play leadership roles. Community engagement rightly involves these leaders but needs to avoid the pitfall of assuming that such voices necessarily represent all interests in the community.
- *Influential power holders:* This issue arises from sources of power that relate in particular to land and property ownership and control of employment opportunities. It is much more common in rural communities for local people to be relatively dependent on particular employers or landlords, in particular estate owners. Engagement with communities that addresses social change and improvement may meet resistance from these sources and it is particularly important to recognise the insecurities that participants may experience and how this can inhibit their willingness to get involved.
- *Communities in transition and conflict:* Many rural communities are not stable. They are undergoing significant social and economic changes that lead to tension and conflict between residents. For example the viability of traditional industries such as farming and fishing may be in question, relatively affluent and older incomers are moving to rural communities from urban centres (often as part-time residents), housing markets are distorted, work opportunities are diminishing and local young people are being forced out. Such transitions will be reflected in conflicts that emerge in engaging rural communities. It is not just that different groups have different issues and concerns that they want to address but that the methods of engagement that they prefer and the responses that they seek may be in tension with one another. It is essential to analyse who takes part and whether more confident and articulate groups dominate and distort the agenda of engagement. It is essential also to recognise that the engaging agencies will not and should not

be neutral in their response to social and economic changes that have clear social justice implications.

Standard 2. Support: We will identify and overcome any barriers to involvement

Issues and responses for rural communities:

- *Physical access:* It is an obvious feature of rural communities that geographical isolation and dispersed populations have an impact on accessibility of community engagement. This may be relevant within a particular community such as an island with dispersed habitation, but becomes even more significant where the engagement seeks to involve people from different localities physically distant from one another. Public transport is often poor and expensive, those without private transport or for whom its use is a significant expense may be excluded. Poorer, older, younger and disabled people may be particularly disadvantaged. The time involved in participation is greater. This often demands more complicated domestic arrangements for example for child care and may preclude involvement of people whose work commitments are restrictive. The latter can result from the character of the work people do, for example long hours and seasonal demands in agriculture. Arranging transport, covering costs of travel and domestic costs incurred by involvement may be particularly important features of good community engagement practice. It is particularly important to consider what methods are likely to be most efficient and effective including use of remote communications such as video conferencing to enable direct discussions to take place.
- *Access to equipment:* The potential for tackling the access difficulties associated with rural areas is greatly affected by the availability of equipment such as computers or video conferencing facilities. Whilst computer access and broad band may now be relatively common those that are more disadvantaged are least likely to have access to or skills for using such facilities. Video conferencing equipment needs to be available in accessible public buildings at suitable times and the skill to use it needs to be in place.
- *Language:* Whilst it is not necessarily a significant issue for all rural communities, in some the language that is used for engagement may be an issue. Gaelic medium engagement may for example be a desirable approach in some settings. Where minority communities have a presence and English is not a first language attention needs to be given to interpreting and translation where its absence would inhibit involvement.
- *Hidden exclusion/stigma:* In relation to the involvement standard the importance of identifying 'hidden' communities and addressing stigmatisation have been noted. Those that feel they are not an accepted part of communities will require particular support to encourage them to participate. This might include attention to advocacy and mentoring for these groups but the danger with this is that the excluded are potentially seen as the problem when the reality is that it is social attitudes of the majority that impact on the

minorities. Support may therefore require direct attention to tackling, racist, ageist, homophobic or other negative attitudes

- *Access to professional advice and support:* Whilst the actual ratio of professionals to population size who can play a role in supporting engagement of marginalised member of the community may not be different from other areas, the small size and dispersal of populations in rural areas often renders such support much less available. One of the ways of responding to this is to be much more flexible about partnership working and use scarce resources collaboratively to enable all populations to be reached.

Standard 3. Planning: We will gather evidence of the needs and available resources and use this to agree the purpose, scope and timescale of the engagement and the actions to be taken

Issues and responses for rural communities:

- *Profiling needs and resources:* When planning community engagement, practitioners in rural communities emphasise the importance of a secure knowledge of the community. This is not just a matter of understanding its social and economic characteristics but of understanding its aspirations and the human and physical assets that are available to the community.
- *Recognising and supporting asset led community activity:* In any area the community should be seen as a key contributor not only to defining needs and identifying solutions but to the development and implementation of action. There often seems to be a greater level of self reliance in rural communities that results in generating their own community led solutions to problems. In many rural communities independent collaborative self help is a strong tradition that is often evidenced in the existence of community led organisations whose authority in partnership action alongside public agencies needs to be respected in the way that engagement is planned and conducted
- *Ensuring that a needs lead approach recognises disadvantage and diverse experiences:* The commitment to gathering evidence of needs requires recognition that rural communities may not be as homogenous as they are sometimes perceived to be (see commentary on the involvement standard). Unfortunately area based formulas used for identifying disadvantage, for example, the Scottish Indicators of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) are not sufficiently sensitive to identify dispersed disadvantage. Reliance on such sources may result in 'blindness' to the needs that are actually present and to which community engagement in rural communities should be sensitive.
- *Recognition of local cultures and traditions:* Discussion of the involvement and support standards has already highlighted the importance of being responsive to local traditions and cultures and to the possibility that not everyone will share the dominant influences. Planning how engagement will be conducted needs, for example to take account of when and where people feel comfortable meeting, what style of communications works for them, seasonal factors that may affect patterns of work, events and celebrations. Such

factors may well affect the agreement of shared purposes for the engagement or its timescale.

Standard 4. Methods: We will agree and use methods of engagement that are fit for purpose

Issues and responses for rural communities:

- *Need for creative and inclusive methods of engagement:* The comments on the earlier standards all point to the need to be creative about the way in which engagement is conducted. Particular attention needs to be given to reaching those who are more likely to be excluded and this will often require agencies to address the experience of specific groups of people whose interests may not be represented by engaging with the community as a whole. Resort to occasional public meetings, or working only through established groups like Community Councils will not be likely to be effective. In the context of travel difficulties agencies need to think about how they reach out to communities for example with road shows or interactive exhibitions using mobile facilities. Use of new technology to enable remote communication is also important.
- *Enabling dialogue about community needs and responses that embrace sensitive/stigmatising issues:* There are several aspects to this that need attention. Where addressing the issues falls within the capacity of the respective agencies and communities, it is appropriate that engagement is conducted specifically with particular interest communities that have a shared experience rather than with the wider public. This avoids public exposure for people who may find it very uncomfortable because they have to face negative attitudes. When controversial or sensitive issues need to be addressed in the wider public, ground rules for so doing should be set down that enable constructive dialogue. Some methods of engagement such as public meetings and forums can be particularly difficult to use in a controlled manner that enables reflection about issues that are controversial. They tend to provide a platform for the disaffected, vociferous and articulate to present their arguments often to the exclusion of other voices. Methods that allow written comment, or group presentation assisted by mentors or advocates may prove to be more helpful.
- *Flexibility that engages people at the level appropriate to their particular concerns/needs and reflects patterns of local life:* People need to be enabled to participate in a way that is most suitable to their concerns and circumstances. In rural communities, as elsewhere, there will always be a need to engage local area based and interest communities. However, the scale of population frequently means that the members of interest communities are widely dispersed and methods must enable participation for all. Too often it appears that engagement is organised for the convenience of agencies and their staff. In rural communities location of services is usually in main centres of population which restricts access for more remote communities and requires particular commitment to outreach practice that is tailored to the life styles and work patterns of local communities.

Standard 5. Working Together: We will agree and use clear procedures to enable the participants to work with one another efficiently and effectively

Issues and responses for rural communities:

- *Personalising of conflicts:* The small scale of local communities frequently means that people who may have conflicting interests are more likely to be directly acquainted with one another. This may include exposure for agency workers who live in the same communities. Fear of the consequences of publicly identifying differences may lead to resistance to participation unless a culture is established that enables differences to be handled without recrimination and descent to personalised animosity.
- *Influences of history of relationships:* a feature of personalised conflict is often that it relates to other contexts than the specific current focus of interaction. In communities characterised by relative stability residents may have relationships that run over their whole lifetime and have received memories of relationships between previous generations. A product of this may be that there are established natural alliances or animosities that influence open dialogue about community issues. These alliances and animosities may result in capacity of participants to wield power that is unrelated to the subject matter of the engagement but which distorts an open debate about issues and options. Community engagement needs to get beyond these influences but to do so it has to acknowledge that they may be there. The agreement of procedures to enable effective dialogue can help to address such influences.
- *Conflicts and tensions between community groups:* Whilst some sources of conflict may relate to personal and family relationships others may relate to identification with particular community identities. In particular, tension between established residents and incomers is increasingly common. This may relate to the arrival of relatively affluent older residents that is felt to threaten established traditions of community life and, through impact on property values the opportunities for local people to remain in their communities. Equally it may arise from arrival of migrant workers bringing different culture and language and a perceived threat, for example, to local employment and wage levels. If community engagement is about participatory democratic debate of significant public issues it should be addressing these complex and controversial issues. But to address them productively it needs to pay particular attention to the working together standard.
- *Deference to powerful figures:* In discussing issues relating to the involvement standard the potential negative influence of powerful individuals was noted. The working together standard indicators give particular attention to equalising power relationships, avoiding hidden agendas and promoting mutual respect. Where there are particular tensions arising from the influence of powerful individuals this needs to be openly acknowledged and addressed.

Standard 6. Sharing Information: We will ensure necessary information is communicated between the participants

Issues and responses for rural communities:

- *Strong local networks:* Previous notes have indicated the parallel strengths and weaknesses that may be associated with the relatively strong social networks that operate in rural communities. In terms of transmission of information they can also be a double edged sword. For those that are within the networks information flow may be relatively good but, for those that are not part of them, exclusion can be reinforced. It is important therefore to understand how communications work in particular communities but not be dependent on the natural systems. It is also important to appreciate that dependence on informal local networks can result in the inevitable, but usually inadvertent, distortions that result from retelling stories.
- *Diversity and format of information:* The general principles that apply in all communities of tailoring information to the needs of different groups are just as relevant to rural communities and serve as a reminder of the need to assess the diversity of rural communities.

Standard 7. Working with others: We will work effectively with others with an interest in the engagement

Issues and responses for rural communities:

- *Drawing on the shared experience of rural communities:* The general principles of this standard apply equally to rural communities. However rural practitioners have stressed the value of exchanging experience between them to ensure that innovative community engagement practice that addresses issues of rurality is widely shared. The resourcefulness of rural communities and their capacity to find their own solutions to issues is seen as a rich resource for the improvement of practice.

Standard 8. Improvement: We will develop actively the skills, knowledge and confidence of all the participants

Issues for remote rural communities:

- *Drawing on the skills of rural communities and learning from one another (including agencies learning from communities):* As noted in relation to the working with others standard, high value is placed by rural workers on learning exchange between rural areas. Particularly notable is the recognition that there are community led organisations in rural communities that can act as exemplars of good community engagement practice including community development trusts, councils of voluntary organisations

- *Overcoming access problems:* As in relation to other aspects of rural engagement access and distance issues apply to development of opportunities for learning. Distance learning linked with local practice has particular potential and is already illustrated for example by the development of the University of the Highlands and Island HNC Working with Communities at Lews College in Stornoway.

Standard 9. Feedback: We will feed back the results of the engagement to the wider community and agencies affected

Issues and responses for rural communities:

- *Ensuring that it happens and that it is not just the established networks that get to know:* This is a general requirement but as noted in relation to information dependence on local systems can have significant weaknesses
- *Making sure the format is appropriate to local cultures and ways of working:* Again this is a general obligation but one that requires recognition of the potential diversity of rural communities

Standard 10. Monitoring and Evaluation: We will monitor and evaluate whether the engagement meets its purposes and the national standards for community engagement

Issues and responses for rural communities:

There is widespread commitment to the importance of this standard but no issues specific to remote rural communities have been highlighted.