

STATE OF RURAL SERVICES 2021: DRAFT PROJECT PLAN

Project purpose

The State of Rural Services 2021 (SORS) will highlight recent or current trends in service provision in rural areas of England, with a particular focus on those that have resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions. This will create an evidence base of relevance to policy makers and policy influencers at the national and local levels. There is thought to be quite a body of relevant evidence and intelligence which has been collected during 2020 by a range of rural and other interest groups. More is likely to become available during 2021. This could usefully be assembled to identify the common findings and lessons.

Background and context

SORS reports were produced by RE in both 2016 and 2018, which looked at recent trends and the current availability of a range of services (variously delivered by the public, private and VCS sectors) in rural areas of England. These reports were largely based on collating existing evidence, although some secondary analysis of data was included.

The shape of the 2021 SORS report will be different. Although some recent statistical evidence is still expected to be included for context, the intention in this report is to pay particular focus to the medium to long term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions. This will involve drawing as heavily as possible on evidence and intelligence drawn from RE stakeholder organisations. It is intended to make the 2021 report more of a joint effort with the RE Stakeholder Group.

Project objectives

The project objectives are to seek to understand better:

- ❖ Whether the pandemic and restrictions have altered the extent or shape of service provision and its accessibility in rural areas;
- ❖ Whether the pandemic and restrictions have accelerated or slowed existing trends in rural service provision;
- ❖ Whether changes brought about by the pandemic and restrictions are likely to prove long lasting or short term;
- ❖ Whether there are implications from these rural service trends for policy or delivery at the national and local levels.

In addressing these objectives, a number of research questions are relevant, namely:

- Which services have proved most valuable to rural communities in 2020-21, including during lockdown?
- Which services have proved most resilient in rural areas in 2020-21 and why? Have they adapted?
- Are there certain services pulling out of or significantly reducing in rural areas and has this trend quickened in 2020-21?
- Whether rural trends in 2020-21 have differed between those services where provision is mandatory and those where it is discretionary?

- What impact have the events of 2020-21 had on the uptake of online services by rural communities?
- What impact have the events of 2020-21 had on community action as a model for service provision?
- What role have local community assets played in enabling service provision in rural areas?
- Are recent trends in rural service provision impacting some population groups more than others?
- Are recent trends in rural service provision impacting some types of rural area more than others?

Outline work plan

The SORS project will include the following stages and activities, which in some cases will overlap.

Stage		Content	Timescale
1	Project initiation	Review and sign off Project Plan. Sign up Task & Finish Group. Plan Rural Panel use with CCRI.	December 2020 to January 2021
2	Rural Panel survey	Draft and agree survey questions. Circulate and manage Panel survey. Test survey options with SG members. Extract response data and analyse.	January 2021 to April 2021
3	Collate and sift RE SG member evidence	Request further evidence from SG that they have generated. Sift evidence and pull out material.	January 2021 to March 2021
4	Assemble pre-existing evidence (as context)	Search recent (post-SORS 2018) trend statistics and evidence to use as context. Log material in a usable format.	April 2021 to June 2021
5	Analyse and structure evidence	Methodically review evidence from stages 2, 3 and 4 above. Decide on structure for the report and hence the evidence.	July 2021 to early August 2021
6	Draft written project report	Create draft for comment by T&F Group. Revise / finalise report as appropriate. Produce launch and dissemination plan. Have report formatted for publication.	Late August 2021 to November 2021

Project outputs

The main output from the project will be a written report for publication, setting out the evidence base in a structured way and outlining the main findings, whilst flagging some implications for policy. This report will include a summary.

A dissemination plan will be produced towards the end of the project, to ensure that target audiences are identified and appropriate means to reach them are adopted.

A PowerPoint presentation will also be prepared, based on the report, for use at meetings and events. This will be required in time for the launch of the report.

Project resources

The SORS project will be funded from within RE's own resources which it derives from its supporters' financial contributions. £8,900 has been set aside for the core research activity, to gather, analyse and structure the evidence and intelligence, and then to produce a written project report.

Brian Wilson will lead the SORS project and will undertake most of the research. He will also be the main author of the project report. Some help with data analysis will be available from Dan Worth and some help formatting the report will be available from Richard Inman (both of whom are members of the RSN office team which provides support to RE).

CCRI at the University of Gloucestershire will assist the project by managing the online survey, which will be sent out to rural residents who have agreed to be part of the Rural Panel. It may be possible to top this up by asking some RE stakeholders to circulate the survey further, though this will need careful thought, so it does not noticeably bias or unbalance the findings.

Members of the RE Stakeholder Group will be invited to input by supplying evidence or intelligence that their organisations' have gathered about rural service trends, especially where that derives from the 2020-21 experience of the pandemic and restrictions. Indeed, some of this evidence has already been supplied.

A sub-set of the RE Stakeholder Group will be invited to form a project Task & Finish Group, which provides guidance at key stages (see below). This will involve reviewing documents and the draft final report, as well as being asked for advice where appropriate.

It is likely that external PR advisers will be commissioned in due course to assist with the project report launch at Rural Vulnerability Day, including any sell-in to the print and broadcast media.

Project timescale

Project activity is due to commence in December 2020 and to complete by Autumn 2021, so the report could be published either in late 2021 or early 2022 (depending on plans yet to be drawn up for a Rural Vulnerability Day).

Management and oversight

The project lead will report on progress and any issues arising to RE Directors. That will ensure the project delivers within the resources available to RE and at a pace which meets plans for the report launch.

As noted above, a sub-set of the RE Stakeholder Group will be invited to form a project Task & Finish Group. They will have an advisory role, offering guidance to the project lead. That is likely to include reviewing key documents and the draft final report, as well as being available for advice or a steer where appropriate.

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Project plan version 1.2
10th December 2020