

RSCP Evaluation - SW Regional Discussion Group – Summary of Key Points

Achievements of RSCP

Community Engagement

RSCP is seen to have played an important catalytic role in promoting engagement with rural communities, providing a focus to bring partners together to work with rural people. RSCP has supported parish planning work in all of the sub-regions apart from Gloucestershire. Parish planning is seen as the cornerstone of work to strengthen and engage rural communities, and RSCP is seen to have significantly accelerated progress and raised the quality of the plans produced. In Cornwall, Parish Plans are the sustainable communities plans for rural areas, each having an action plan at the end and providing a tool for the local community.

There is significant frustration that the momentum built up in supporting parish planning will be unable to be sustained when the programme ends, and that this will disappoint many rural communities across the region.

Tackling Social Exclusion

Some of the sub-regions have placed a significant emphasis on tackling rural social exclusion in their programmes. For example, about half of Devon's projects have been concerned with increasing social inclusion in rural areas, and the programme has addressed the needs of travellers, women and other marginal groups, as well as seeking to engage different groups in dialogue at the policy level. This continues earlier work under the Countryside Agency's Social Inclusion programme. RCC now plays a key role in chairing a number of county focus groups. Cornwall has adopted a similar approach, with the roll forward of the social inclusion officer. Through the LAA, Cornwall has sought to tackle social exclusion by working with the Carnegie Trust to engage excluded groups in community planning and working with the LSC to increase engagement with minority groups. This work is expected to continue beyond the end of the RSCP, through the work of the LSC social inclusion officer. Somerset has put significant emphasis on the young people's agenda, and has made some progress in bringing different agencies together to work towards common goals. When young people get involved with Youth Offending Team or equivalent local group, Vista brought together a range of agencies that otherwise were competing with each other. This helped the agencies to focus on the needs of the young person.

Building Capacity

RSCP has strengthened the role of VCS in LAAs. There is a more prominent role both for RCCs (which are closer to LAA process in most sub-regions as a result, e.g. Cornwall where RCC takes the lead on the safer and stronger communities block) and other VCS organisations (many of whom would not have a role in LAA delivery were it not for RSCP). The programme is seen to have been particularly beneficial for the town and parish council sector in the South West, giving its work greater funding and recognition in the sub-regional agenda, partly as a result of the encouragement for this provided by GOSW. The sector therefore has an enviable position compared to other regions. Given the limited range of funding opportunities, there is some concern about the impact that cessation of RSCP funding would have. Two regional projects have been supported: the SW ACRE Network (SWAN) and SW Conference of Local Council Associations (SWLCA). Both are seen to have significantly enhanced capacity at the regional level. RSCP helped SWAN to consolidate relationship with GOSW and building the capacity of other relevant regional partners.

County Associations of Local Councils (CALCs) were recognised as an important deliverer of RSCP in South West. In Cornwall first tier (town and parish councils) wasn't recognised by LAA but RSCP helped to change views about this.

Raising the Rural Agenda

It was stressed that RSCP has helped to raise the awareness and profile of rural issues locally, helping to emphasise needs where these were often not understood before. In the West of England, the least rural of the sub-regions, RSCP has helped to raise the profile of rural issues and many people have been surprised by the needs of rural communities locally and the amount of activity to address them. RSCP has helped to inform the revision of the rural strategy for the area. The achievements of the parish planning work have been of wider interest in the sub-region and stimulated interest in adopting similar approaches in urban communities. In Cornwall, the parish planning work has been of interest to a wide range of organisations, and has helped to inform the work of service providers such as the PCT and police. Parish plans have played an important role in rural proofing the Market and Coastal Towns Initiative, helping to highlight the needs of rural parishes and helping MCTI to address them. By highlighting local rural needs, they also help to inform the LAA. In Wiltshire, rural issues were already prominent in the sub-regional agenda, with RSCP helping to strengthen the priorities for action. In Gloucestershire, RSCP has had a significant impact on Rural Renaissance and MRD and provided important added value. Also helped Glos's Rural Economic Advisory Panel (REAP) and GCC understand the community issues.

Greatest Achievements of RSCP

Participants were asked to identify the single greatest overall achievement of the programme. The following summarises the answers given:

- Maintaining momentum on rural development and rural community issues
- Providing a structure for key partners and interest groups to work together
- Bringing what on the face of it may seem a disparate range of projects together to tackle social exclusion issues and add value to an already strong rural programme, previously driven by the RDA economic agenda
- Funding small rural groups to enable them to continue their work
- Broadening community engagement, encouraging more people from different backgrounds to get involved in their communities
- Taking a programme and locking it into rural strategy and delivery, seeing it work in practice
- Very successful partnership working, high levels of feedback that the programme is doing a good job
- Enhancing quality of life and contributing to improvements in quality of life perceptions survey
- Strengthening partnership working, enhancing the influence and voice of rural organisations and influencing regional strategy

Asked to identify the greatest benefit for their particular organisation, participants answered as follows:

- Entering a bottom-up programme of activity, building on the work of the RCC and other partners, and getting involved in work they would not otherwise have been able to
- Raising the profile of the network and supporting the work done on the ground by the RCC
- Delivering the rural strategy

- Putting the work of the RCC up for public examination and consultation, gaining endorsement and providing a stronger basis for development
- Helping to maintain the work of an infrastructure charity (without RSCP funding they would have lost people and funding), strengthening their work with other organisations and positioning them to bid for new funding
- Giving them the funding to support social/community rather than just economic development work in rural areas, providing a fund that is needed, works and can deliver
- Building influence and credibility of the RCC, opening doors for them, and building their role as an audited LAA delivery body.

Value for Money

Participants agreed that RSCP has offered very good value for money, achieving a great deal for relatively small amounts of money.

Devon's mid term review of RSCP concluded that the programme had achieved a great deal for a small financial outlay.

Planning and Allocation of Resources

The planning process varied between sub-regions, depending on the local policy context. In three sub-regions (Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and West of England), the RSCP programme was planned in advance of the LAA. In Cornwall, the sub-regional programme was very closely tied to the LAA, with both being developed over the same timeframe (Round 2 LAA); funds were split between 3 LAA objectives but the majority of funding went to the first outcome; significant efforts went into integrating RSCP with the LAA timetable and indicators. This required a large amount of work within a short time period, putting significant strains on capacity, but ultimately worked well, helped by the strength of the partnership, and was highly beneficial. In Devon, planning of RSCP built on the experience of programmes that preceded it, with Devon Rural Network taking the lead in engaging a voluntary sector grouping that decided on funding priorities. This helped to endorse many existing activities by the RCC and others and gave greater strength to the agreed work programme. The programme had to be retrofitted into the existing (Round 1) LAA, with little natural fit, but this has since been smoothed over. In Wiltshire, the programme contributed to an existing set of rural priorities established in the Rural Development Framework. Rural Executive (REX) group (partnership led by WCC) has a rural proofing role and identified a number of projects and bids that fitted with Wiltshire's aspirations for its rural areas and communities. As LAA was being developed due to early work done by REX there was a good fit with RSCP projects and the LAA. Time pressures were very challenging for the LA. Projects that were funded are fine and do fit but could have been more refined.

Other programmes such as Change Up, which have helped to strengthen VCS capacity in rural areas, helped to strengthen the foundations on which RSCP built, and therefore helped the planning process. CRCC and certain colleagues happened to be in the right place at the right time. Change Up consortium process was also testing LA and VCS capacity. Change Up (CU) consortium consultation had only just ended and this helped Cornwall get the data it needed. CU was a bit 'usual suspect' in some sub-regions though.

It was generally agreed that the process of designing sub-regional programmes, developing funding bids and allocating funding was challenging given the short timescales involved, putting strain on sub-regional capacity. Some concern was expressed that this may have reduced the breadth of engagement and level of refinement in some cases, although the results are generally seen to have been positive, with most sub-regions pleased with the resulting choice of projects.

Supporting VCS to deliver LAA outcomes has been positive but still need for greater capacity in the sector if VCS is to continue to be expected to deliver on areas of LAA. There is an urgent need for CapacityBuilders to support VCS on taking forward LAA delivery.

Programme Administration

The broad, flexible, light touch approach of the delivery of RSCP was welcomed.

Partnership

GOSW sought to build RSCP on existing partnerships as far as possible, and this was seen to have reduced the effort in implementing the programme. Often this involved working with sub-regional Rural Renaissance Partnerships. It was stressed, however, that RSCP differs from Rural Renaissance in having social and community objectives rather than economic ones, and it was therefore important to make this clear and to adapt the partnerships as necessary. Participants spoke of the challenges involved in successful partnership working and the barriers to be overcome, but found the experience rewarding and were positive about the results. There are examples of partners brought together by RSCP going on to work together on new opportunities and using different funding schemes.

In Cornwall, RSCP has also forged longer term joint working between partners that are outside RSCP – impact of RSCP has been bringing new partners together. CRCC has enhanced its capacity as an accountable body for Cornwall. In Somerset, there is no single partnership overseeing delivery of RSCP. A decision was made to support emerging Community Associations (especially those looking to support migrant workers in rural areas). Somerset rural action partnership created. RSCP funds Vista to train around Community Development for Somerset's rural communities. In Devon, partnership working was already established. RSCP helped to redress the balance of social and community with economic development. When RSCP was set up, affordable housing was the big issue. RSCP has helped to ensure rural dimension of affordable housing has gained suitable prominence in Devon. LAA hasn't been too overburdening in Devon. In Wiltshire, Rural Renaissance Partnership managed RSCP - Partnership was given the priorities by REX partners and it was therefore clear at outset what the focus of RSCP would be.

RSCP and the LAA

The relationship between LAA and RSCP has varied in the sub-regions. In Cornwall a large amount of effort was spent in integrating the RSCP and the LAA, which was quite a challenge but has brought very positive results. Biggest difficulty was getting indicators for LAA, and they decided to work to the mandatory indicator on empowering local people to have a say on service delivery. More information and support (networks) is needed on how to strengthen the VCS infrastructure role *vis a vis* the LAA. RSCP helped the LAA to focus on rural issues. Even in Cornwall, where most population lives in villages and small towns, LAA was primarily an urban model. RSCP helped to force County Council and LAA partners to look seriously at rural issues. RCCs and infrastructure organisations played a huge role in bridging the gap in knowledge and capacity that exists between communities, the frontline VCS and the LAA.

In Devon there has been a light touch, flexible approach with the LAA allowing the RSCP partnership some flexibility in implementing its sub-regional programme, reducing the administrative burden. In those sub-regions where the RSCP preceded the LAA (Glos, Wilts and West of England), the former has helped to influence the latter, with RSCP objectives and projects being fitted into the LAA process. This has helped the rural VCS to assume a greater role within the LAA.

Participants commented on some tensions between RSCP and LAAs. These relate to the more top-down focus of LAAs and a focus on key targets and indicators, compared to the bottom-up, community focus of RSCP. Some comments were made that it can be difficult to identify common targets and indicators and to identify the links between RSCP activity and the central targets of the LAA. LAAs are seen to have largely urban roots, and while RSCP has helped to give them a more rural flavour, there are some tensions between the two models. Given limited resources there are some concerns about a tendency to focus on the “safer” rather than “stronger” aspects of the safer, stronger communities block of the LAA, limiting resources for building rural capacity, which will be exacerbated if and when RSCP funding ceases. RSCP is seen to have played an important role in meeting rural objectives in the LAA, and there is a danger that this will cease at the end of the programme. The ability of RSCP to contribute to softer outcomes, e.g. in relation to capacity and community engagement, is a strength of the programme that will be difficult to continue without it. These outcomes are seen as crucial in providing the infrastructure for delivering outcomes in rural communities.

Timetable and Future Sustainability

Most participants expressed the view that two years is too short a time for a programme such as this. Much of the first year is concerned with the developmental stage of the projects, which begin to have an impact in year 2, only to lose the momentum gained. Participants commented that uncertainty about future funding is already adversely affecting opportunities for engaging communities. At least a third year is needed for projects to have an impact, while greater continuity over the medium term would be advantageous.

However, it was also pointed out that RSCP should not just be seen as a two year programme, having continued the work of previous Countryside Agency initiatives. Concern was expressed that if RSCP ended the benefits of these initiatives would be lost. There is particular concern that the momentum built up in supporting parish planning across the South West will be lost.

It was generally agreed that RSCP provided an important source of funding which could not be easily replaced at the local level, raising concerns that many of the achievements of the programme would come to an end if no further funding was provided.

Lessons for the Future

Asked to identify the single most important lessons for the future, participants suggested the following:

- Delivering the rural community agenda can only be achieved by having strong rural communities – this may seem obvious but it is widely misunderstood
- There is a need for sustainability and continuity to address ongoing needs
- Haskins set the agenda for future support for rural communities – simplification, trusting local people, longevity and sustainability – this agenda has been taken forward by RSCP and should be maintained in future
- RCCs and partners have built up skills and expertise and ongoing funding is needed to maintain them
- Rural communities can be engaged for little money, have energy and voluntary commitment; small amounts of investment, properly placed, would play huge dividends in understanding and delivering for rural needs
- Mainstreaming requires passing the ball to someone who is willing and able to pick it up and run with it, not just dropping the ball and hoping someone will pick it up
- The LAA is the right place for RSCP, but the work needs to be continued and integrated

- Six months will see off the progress of RSCP, people can't afford to wait to see what happens; maintaining capacity and engaging communities requires ongoing funding and buy-in
- The three year CSR process is a nonsense and provides no continuity, and this is true for other funding programmes as well as RSCP
- There is a need for an operating framework with a longer term commitment, as emphasised by Haskins
- DCLG has no idea about rural issues and little understanding of parish and town councils, so there is no impetus to mainstream the work of RSCP
- There would be benefits in engaging in 5-10 year contracts with VCS for rural delivery
- The rural agenda is being marginalised relative to the urban one, while social issues are being marginalised relative to environmental issues in rural areas
- We are about to have to stagger around on two legs of the 3-legged stool again
- RSCP has been a positive experience but future prospects are negative
- Ongoing funding is needed to maintain networks (including RCC network) as well as individual RCCs
- It's good that Defra have funded an evaluation, though it would have been better if it was done earlier
- Flexibility and light touch approach of RSCP has been a strength, but there is concern that sub-regional agenda is creating more bureaucracy
- RSCP is a fund before its time.

Participants

We are grateful to the following participants in the discussion group:

Area Covered	Participant	Organisation	Role
Somerset	Alison Templeton	Somerset CC	Local Authority
Somerset	Angela Kerr	Vista	Deliverer
Somerset	Sara Iles	Rural Action P/ship	Deliverer
Cornwall	Mark Richardson	Cornwall RCC	Deliverer
Cornwall	Sarah Mason	Cornwall Assn of Parish and Town Councils	Deliverer
Devon	Jen Anderton	Devon CC	Local Authority
Devon	Jay Talbot	CCD	Deliverer
Wiltshire	Tim Martiensson	Wiltshire CC	Local Authority
Gloucestershire	Carey Stevens	Gloucestershire CC	Local Authority
Gloucestershire	Elin Tatersall	Gloucestershire RCC	Deliverer
Gloucestershire	John McLoughlin	Gloucestershire CC	Local Authority
Regional	Andrew Grant	SWCLCA (Regional Project)	Deliverer
Regional	Stephen Wright	SWAN (Regional Project)	Deliverer
Regional	Scott Jacobs-Lange	GOSW	Government Office for the South West