


Small Schools: Big Communities

Village schools and extended services

A report by Capacity



The Commission for Rural Communities acts as the advocate for England's rural communities, as an expert adviser to government, and as a watchdog to ensure that government actions, policies and programmes recognise and respond effectively to rural needs, with a particular focus on disadvantage.

It has three key functions:

Rural advocate:

the voice for rural people, businesses and communities

Expert adviser:

giving evidence-based, objective advice to government and others

Independent watchdog:

monitoring, reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally

The school is the thread between and through families and the community. The thread of belonging; the school is the heart of the community. (Head Teacher, federated village school)

Introduction

Extended services are one of a range of initiatives introduced between 1997 and 2010 to break the link between poverty and poor educational outcomes. All schools are now expected to provide the core offer of childcare; a varied menu of activities and homework clubs outside of the school day; referral to specialist agencies; parenting support; and wider community access to school facilities.

Schools offering access to extended services face particular challenges in delivering services in rural areas, where populations are dispersed and which include many scattered small communities. However, the provision of holiday schemes and other activities, childcare and parenting support may also offer a life line to remote villages and hamlets which suffer from poor transport links to larger towns.

In those same communities, village schools which are part of school clusters provide a venue for extended services and this may, in some circumstances, secure greater viability for schools with small and falling rolls. Across rural England, the closure of village schools is almost invariably opposed by parents and other community members. There is some indication of a slow down in the rate of closures affecting small rural schools but, with impending cuts in public expenditure, that position could change.

This summary report provides a view of how extended services are being delivered in four rural school clusters, the impact of cluster structures and the contribution of small village schools to tackling poor educational achievement and enabling families to access services. The report demonstrates the crucial significance of schools to rural communities and their role in creating an inclusive or “big” society.

The report also raises some issues for providers and policy makers: about wider community access and funding and about whether the extended services offered might be strengthened by closer alignment to a social enterprise or community development model. Village schools are identified as the lynchpin of extended services in rural communities and the key to ensuring that services can become more effective in reaching all families, including those most at risk of exclusion.

The report was undertaken for the Commission for Rural Communities by Capacity.

Background

Overall, children in rural areas enjoy higher achievement, with more gaining good GCSE passes. However, there are persistent inequalities of experience between children from different income groups.¹ There is also some evidence that some groups of pupils may be additionally disadvantaged by living in rural areas.²

Rural poverty is often hidden. In addition, many rural areas which have low scores in standard measures of deprivation are classed as deprived in terms of barriers to accessing services. One million people in rural areas of working age have no qualifications.³ The inward flow of older people and higher income families, the lack of affordable housing, deterioration of public transport and the loss of local services are all factors contributing to inequalities and contradictions within rural areas.

The extended services offer is at the heart of the Every Child Matters Framework which was established by the previous government. Through activities like booster classes and homework clubs, sports and hobbies, the aim is to improve pupil motivation, well-being and attainment. Links to specialist services provide help for pupils and their families to overcome particular difficulties, while access for the community to school facilities provides a link to adult skills development and regeneration.

Extended service delivery in rural areas presents challenges similar to those faced by other rural services, including higher costs and the barriers created by distance. Evaluations of schools offering extended services suggest they are achieving positive outcomes for children and parents, but have continuing difficulties in engaging the most disadvantaged families.

Slightly more than half of rural schools are offering the full core offer compared with 71% of urban schools. Rural schools are less likely to offer childcare, activities in the evening, parenting support and community access to school facilities. Urban schools are, on average, offering more activities than rural schools. Proportionately fewer rural schools provide adult learning opportunities or signpost to these.⁴

Small village schools are in close contact with families and have a track record of providing good outcomes for children. Based in isolated communities, small schools may hold the key to engaging the most disadvantaged families, but their numbers are decreasing.⁵

¹ CRC (2010) State of the Countryside update: Children and educational services

² Defra (2009) Educational Attainment in Rural Areas

³ <http://www.poverty.org.uk/r59/index.shtml>

⁴ DfE (2010) Extended Services Evaluation: End of Year One Report Research Report DFE-RR016

⁵ <http://www.housing.org.uk/default.aspx?tabid=232&mid=1150&ct=Details&ArticleID=2388>

The study

The study, which took place in 2010, developed qualitative case studies of four rural extended school clusters, each of which included one or more small school serving remote villages or hamlets. Each of the case studies was selected, through web search and known contacts, as likely examples of good practice.

The case studies were:

Driffield School Cluster (East Riding of Yorkshire)

Leek High School Cluster (Staffordshire Moorlands)

Rye College Cluster (East Sussex)

Smithdon High School Cluster (Kings Lynn and West Norfolk)

For the purpose of defining a small school, an upper threshold of 150 pupils was used. The village schools selected included:

Gembling Primary School (Driffield)

St Bartholomew's Church of England Primary School (Leek)

Manifold Primary School (Leek School Cluster)

Icklesham Church of England Primary School (Rye)

St Thomas Church of England Primary School (Rye)

Docking Primary School (Kings Lynn and West Norfolk))

The work of the school clusters was profiled and analysed against local socio-economic and health, education, employment and transport factors. Head teachers, extended services staff, other service professionals, young people and parents of children attending village schools contributed their experiences and views in qualitative interviews and focus groups.

As members of the community and the organisations to which we belong, we possess tremendous power to make a young person's life miserable or joyous. Together we can make a difference to young people's futures.
(Head Teacher)

Key findings

The schools in the study are committed to improving outcomes for children and young people. Each cluster has addressed the key issues in rural extended services provision in its own way, suggesting that extended service delivery is less of a defined intervention than a family of approaches.

In each case, strategies have been developed to overcome the challenges of distance and poor transport links. Support for transition for pupils from outlying small schools is a further feature of the model. All but one of the school clusters provide opportunities for adult learning. Good multi-agency working and support for small schools though clusters are further features of the approach. Together, the schools are making the full core offer of extended service provision.

Within individual schools, the range of services is more limited, but this varies across areas. The pattern of provision across each cluster has, in most cases, been developed in response to expressed needs identified through consultations, but funding is a limiting factor.

The provision of extended services is associated with gains for children and young people and for parents. This is suggested in improving attainment results, not just at GSCE level, but at other key stages. Of particular significance, there is some evidence that the gap between disadvantaged young people and children from other backgrounds is narrowing. Other reported impacts include fewer exclusions, families helped to resolve behaviour and adjustment problems and more engagement by schools with the community.

Young people and parents appear to welcome and value the different elements of extended services provision. Parents would like to have a wider range of activities available locally.

Extended Schools help to protect smaller schools - through networking and lobbying - we have a bigger voice as a cluster, the little schools are heard within the cluster – there is complete equality. (Head teacher, small school)

Extended School Clusters

School clusters form a strategic part of rural extended services delivery. Village schools act as local satellites, particularly for the provision of family learning and parenting programmes. In one cluster, the approach has been to develop a campus model with pooled budgets, integrating these with funding for children's centres. This has enabled the best and most cost-effective use of resources without apparent loss of local responsiveness.

Cluster arrangements strengthen and increase the viability of small schools. Federated schools appear to offer value as a response to falling rolls and difficulties in recruitment. In one cluster, a federation has reinvigorated two small schools and increased networking between families in two village communities.

Secondary schools play a large role in the design and delivery of extended services, but the relationship among cluster schools is based on cooperation and equality. The reciprocal relationships which are evident in the school clusters are similar to those adopted by mutuals, a model which may be particularly suited to rural areas.

The village would die, the school brings in families. It would become a place of second homes, more shops would close. (Parent)

Village Schools

Village schools are essential for effective rural extended services. Offering high quality teaching and learning, they are regarded by teachers and professionals as having an important outreach function, because of their close contact with and knowledge of local communities.

For parents, village schools are the community. Small schools not only offer more personalised learning, but provide opportunities for interaction between community members which might otherwise disappear. With rural shops, post offices and other services in decline, parents feel that the loss of the village school would signal the death of the community itself.

Childcare and other services alongside schools strengthen village life. Many if not most parents are aware of the opportunities to access the facilities of the lead secondary school, but feel it is too far away.

Issues

Rural extended service delivery is contributing to improved attainment and better life chances for children and young people. However, those leading the delivery face a number of challenges.

Staff ...are spread out which has implications for support and management. Funders must understand the cost of time and travel to deliver in a rural area. (Service Manager, Children Young People and Families)

Funding

The study did not specifically consider funding levels or the use of funding, but it was abundantly clear from anecdotal evidence that the weight of the expectations hanging on extended services far outstripped the resources available.

Current funding for schools is weighted for deprivation, including a rural element, but the full extent of rural deprivation and the true costs of rural delivery may not be fairly represented within the current weighting calculation. In addition, in the wake of the Spending Review, cuts in related services provided by local authorities, already thin on the ground in rural areas, can be expected to have an adverse impact on the extended services programme.

Looking to the future, the Coalition Government will introduce a pupil premium to provide additional funding for disadvantaged children. It is important that the formula adopted by the Department for Education for determining the payment reflects rural as well as urban types of disadvantage.

You can get to Bridlington on the bus on Tuesday – but you can't come back until Thursday!

Transport

Access to transport is a fundamental prerequisite of effective extended services delivery. Schools are addressing this in a variety of ways – through special transport arrangements or through the use of subsidies or community driving schemes.

More is needed to ensure that adults as well as children can take advantage of school activities and access to school facilities. Local authorities can assist with this by ensuring that their transport partners do all that they can to ensure that bus routes, fares and timetables enable young people and adults in remote areas to travel between cluster schools for the purpose of accessing education and training, sport and other opportunities.

Community driving schemes encourage volunteering, increase social networks and can reach well beyond public transport routes. Financial support for community driving schemes should, wherever possible, be maintained and extended.

We're on a key meter, so if the electricity runs low at night we either have to ask a neighbour for a lift to Hastings to top it up or sit in the dark. To draw our benefits we have to pay for a bus to Hastings. It costs us £5.20 to go to the doctors. (Workless family without private transport)

Child poverty

The Child Poverty Act 2010 creates a local duty to develop a needs assessment and strategy to reduce child poverty within local authority areas. Schools and extended services should play a key role in supporting children and families to move out of poverty but the schools in the study acknowledged that they are not yet sufficiently engaging families most in need.

If poverty is to be tackled effectively, it must be a priority to identify and consult with those families who don't know about or are prevented from accessing services.

The challenge of consulting with diverse and different communities and with different groups of families, across a large and diverse area, is considerable. Local authorities and partnership structures are already leading the way. However, it is important that consultations are not only formalised but also participative, involving the perspectives of all groups within the community.

Secondary schools and their cluster partners have considerable intellectual and technological resources to offer to their communities. It is important that these can be drawn on by local

communities, whether to help tackle economic and social problems, or to support the growth of small businesses, social enterprises or self-employment. Village schools have a critical role to play in supporting individual families in need or as a hub for activities which will promote learning, economic well-being and social cohesion.

Families stay because it's beautiful – but many have been in a cycle of poverty, where no one has worked, so there are no role models of being employed. (Extended Services Coordinator)

Adult skills

The current low levels of engagement of disadvantaged adults in training and education perpetuate inequalities in income and in health and well-being. In rural communities this is made worse by poor transport, which can make training provision inaccessible. Involvement in education and training by parents will not only improve their opportunities in the labour market, but also add to the skills base of local communities.

There are persistent structural and economic factors which are not within the power of schools to resolve, but parents who need and want help with vocational skills or qualifications should be identified as part of extended services consultations and needs analyses.

In addition, the low skills base in rural communities suggests the need for a stronger strategic lead from local authorities, where necessary re-aligning adult training provision, enabling it to be a mainstream offer in lead and cluster schools.

The school is what connects the community; it should be for all in the community and provide what the community needs. (Head Teacher)

Reconfiguring schools and community

Throughout rural England, village schools continue to close. While in some circumstances this may be unavoidable, it entails a loss to children of high quality teaching and learning and a loss to the community which is felt to be irreparable. At a time when there is a new governmental emphasis on democratic renewal and the involvement of people in services, schools as the hubs of rural villages appear to offer an important template.

While the core business of schools is to educate children, they can do this most effectively where they have support from the whole community. In rural areas, the realisation of this might be served by closer integration between the functions of schools and other structures, including community associations, social enterprises, other statutory services and families.

Some teachers and parents are already developing this template, considering the potential of add-on activities on school sites, whether cafes or health clinics, post offices or shops. A new settlement of this kind might require the realignment of conventional boundaries between professional and non-professional, school and community. Almost certainly it would be served by schools and families revisiting mutual assumptions, constructing shared aims and reaching a new identity of interest. Sustainable rural communities, committed to learning, would be an enviable result.

The full version of this report, *Small Schools: Big Communities - Village schools and extended services*, including the case studies, can be found at www.capacityltd.org.uk

Rural Communities
John Dower House Crescent
Place
Cheltenham Glos. GL50 3RA
Telephone 01242 521381
Facsimile 01242 584270
Email
info@ruralcommunities.gov.uk
www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk