

When The Village Isn't Enough - Can The UK Government's Change For Children Programme Really Address The Needs Of Young Children Who Live In Rural Areas?

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In 2003, the UK government issued its green paper, *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2003b). As well as focusing on agencies working more closely together, the paper introduced the notion of improving outcomes for children in five distinct areas. Those areas are "*Being Healthy, Staying Safe, Enjoying and Achieving, Making a Positive Contribution and Achieving Economic Well-being.*" (DfES, 2003a: 3). In its response to the green paper, the Forum for Rural Children and Young People (2003a: 4) indicated their belief that "*the green paper offers a singular opportunity to improve the lives of every child whether rural or urban.*" Rather than focusing on urban or rural groups per se, the Forum (2003a: 4) commented, in accordance with the spirit of the green paper, that they wanted the changes that result from the implementation of *Every Child Matters* to

"be the catalyst for a renewal of children's services based around the individual needs of children and young people, that take account of their wishes, and are responsive to their local circumstance."

This paper will begin to explore whether there are barriers in place which might prevent young children who live in rural areas from receiving the same degree of benefit as other children from the Change for Children Programme (DfES, 2004) and suggests research to examine this further.

In order to assess the impact of the changes on children in particular groups, it is necessary to establish a clear criteria for that group within an appropriate context. In relation to definitions of 'rural', that have been far from clear, Capizzano and Fiorillo (2004: 3) are right to state "*that the lack of a consistent definition of rurality often complicates discussions of rural issues.*" In 2002, a review of urban and rural area definitions in use by the UK government concluded that existing definitions failed to describe rural areas satisfactorily as a basis for analysis and targeting policy delivery (Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [DEFRA] 2004). Capizzano and Fiorillo (2004: 2) identified rural areas as having

"demographic, economic and social characteristics that differ from national and state averages. Poverty levels, unemployment, and underemployment are often higher in rural areas, while education levels, per capita income, and earnings per job are lower. Beyond these characteristics, low population densities mean that health care, social, and educational services can be more difficult to obtain, especially if reliable transportation is unavailable."

McCluskey identifies three barriers to successful service delivery in rural areas:

- *"Very low levels of capacity, confidence and self-esteem in some rural communities*
- *Scarcity of existing resources and services on which new programmes can be built*
- *Transport problems, scarcity/high costs of public transport."* (McCluskey, 2003: 11)

The Forum for Rural Children and Young People (2003: 2) suggests that many barriers to closer joint working in rural areas are created by *"bureaucracy and regulations that may make sense in an urban context but which need further thought in rural areas"* citing, as an example, geographic and age barriers within Sure Start (2007) programmes as well as the multiplicity of service providers. However, this multiplicity of service providers could actually mean that there is a *larger* field from which services might be delivered and coordinated, some agencies and individuals having greater expertise in rural matters than others. This could assist those whose level of specific knowledge relating to rural matters might be limited, in planning children's services. Action in Rural Sussex (2006: 1), for example, states that

"Rural communities do an immense amount to help themselves, but to do so they need specialist, dedicated, reliable and long term expertise upon which they can rely."

The Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) (2006a: 3) acknowledges that *"rural England is different from urban England"* as their surveys *"throw up numerous distinctions, whether attitudinal, behavioural or demographic"*. Their accurate view is *"that rurality in itself matters"* stating that the differences in views that their report describes *"cannot be explained purely by reference to demographics or socio-economic characteristics."*

In an attempt at extending the Sure Start programme to rural areas, the government introduced the notion of Mini-Sure Start programmes, of which fifteen programmes were to be situated in wholly rural areas. The mini-programmes received a much lower level of funding and covered smaller numbers of children across wider geographic areas. While this appears as something of a sop to those making out the case for rural services for younger children, considerable lessons are to be learnt from these programmes which can be used in the development of rural children's centres. They have been summarised in the Countryside Agency's document, *Delivering Services to Children and Families in Rural Areas: The Early Lessons from Sure Start* (2003). In particular, notice should be taken of the importance the report attaches to

"engaging communities effectively and recognising distinctive needs by: early and continuing engagement with scattered communities, working with each community's agenda; acknowledging and working with the range of social diversity; raising and promptly meeting expectations; addressing resistance to change; and being prepared for a slow pace of development and initial low levels of take up." (Countryside Agency, 2003).

The government has recognised (National Council of Voluntary Childcare Organisations, 2003: 5) that developing Children's Centres in rural areas is different to their development in urban contexts stating that,

"Children's centres operating in rural areas are likely to need greater flexibility than those that operate in urban areas. Given the nature of rural areas - dispersed communities often with small numbers of children under five years old - the same services may need to be replicated for small groups of families in convenient local venues. Full use should be made of community facilities such as school premises, parish churches and community centres." (DfES, 2005: 5)

The Children's Centres guidance (DfES, 2005) consistently talks of a Children's Centre for every Community but government ministers continue to speak inappropriately of a Children's Centre **in** every Community (DfES, 2006) and so reinforce the view held by small rural communities who, according to Burgess (2006), have an acute lack of faith in government understanding of local needs.

So how do we ensure that rural needs are addressed in the design of future services for children and young people? The government believes in rural proofing policy, where rural concerns are considered from the beginning of the policy making process (House of Commons, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, 2003).

The CRC provides a helpful definition of the term rural-proofing describing it as when:

"[policy makers]... consider whether their policy is likely to have a different impact in rural areas make a proper assessment of those impacts if they are likely to be significant and adjust the policy and delivery mechanisms, where appropriate with solutions to meet rural needs and circumstances" (CRC, 2006: 5).

Use of such rural-proofing as a recognised concept seems limited although a number of tools are becoming available (see Hewitt, 2004; Smith and Pickstock, 2005; Kendall Economic Development Associates, 2005). Similarly, Government Offices seem to be taking their rural responsibilities more seriously, developing, for instance, a rural charter (East Midlands Rural Affairs Forum, 2005). Some local Authorities are also responding to the agenda (See Herefordshire, 2005). Sadly, however, the CRC (2006b: 12) have reported that *"evidence shows that rural proofing is not being systematically pursued across policy areas and departments."*

As Peck states, (2006: 1) *"the mythical portrayal of the British countryside as an idyllic landscape"*, often described as 'the myth of the rural idyll', *"conceals an array of problems"* many affecting children and young people. Early signs suggest that sufficient account is not usually taken of rural issues in policy developments (Burgess, 2006). There

is, however, a flicker of hope in that the Community Development Foundation (2006) found that the only initiative they considered which 'thinks rural' is Sure Start.

It is too early to definitively state whether the reforms in children's services take appropriate account of rural issues or if there are likely to be similar levels of benefit for rural as for non-rural children. Further research should be undertaken in this area over the next few years. The proposed research would explore the stated universal nature of the reforms and the notion of every child mattering in relation to those who live in rural areas. The research would examine whether the reforms are addressing issues highlighted in research which mitigate against this. A stated example is that of "*a lack of anonymity in collecting benefits usually at the village post office*" (Shucksmith, 2004: 10). Reduction in the number of such village post offices is likely to result in benefit claimants having to travel even further to other neighbouring villages which retain such a facility and identifying themselves even further within communities. Another example is that of a lack of adequate affordable social housing. Despite this being at the root of much social exclusion and having "*long been identified as essential to the vitality and sustainability of rural communities*", the lack of affordable housing has been identified as "*one of the most important issues facing rural communities in England*" (Shucksmith, 2004: 11). The nature of the research could involve a comparison between outcomes achieved by children of similar ages and economic backgrounds from rural and urban homes.

If we are serious about ensuring that children in rural areas can experience improved outcomes from the reforms, leaving it to the village simply isn't enough.

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