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FAO: Manager, Library Review Consultation

Dear Sir,

Consultation Response: Modernisation Review of Public Libraries

We welcome this opportunity to respond to the consultation on the modernisation review of public libraries.

About us

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 and seeking to mainstream rural into the delivery of policies, nationally, regionally and locally.

See: www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

Reaching rural communities

As recognised in your case study on a mobile library service providing services to a predominantly rural community in East Riding, libraries have the potential to play an important role in rural communities, much wider than just their primary lending function.

Rural areas present distinct delivery challenges for service providers which need to be understood and overcome. Rural areas do not all have the same characteristics which means that the delivery challenges and the most effective solutions are likely to be different in different areas. However, there are some common themes and key issues facing service users and providers in rural areas:

- **Hidden deprivation** - most people who live in rural areas experience a high quality of life. On average they live longer, have better physical and mental health and enjoy healthier

lifestyles (for example, see section 2.6 (pages 49-54) in the State of the Countryside Report 2008). However, the poorest and most disadvantaged rural residents have much poorer health outcomes and experience consistently lower levels of physical and mental health. Targeting and addressing these problems is difficult given that much rural deprivation is hidden and masked by the prevailing affluence of many rural areas.

Typically rural deprivation is scattered rather than concentrated. Although on average, rural areas suffer less deprivation than urban areas, when the scores for individual small rural areas on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) are looked at in detail, sparsely populated areas (i.e. those in the most rural areas) show higher levels of deprivation than their less sparsely populated counterparts.

The State of the Countryside update on "Rural analysis of the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2007" published in November 2008 includes data on rural deprivation. The accompanying press release outlines the key points, including the finding that only 2.4% of deprived English areas are in rural England yet **17% of all deprived households are rural households.**

- **An ageing rural population** - the median age of rural residents is nearly 6 years older than their urban counterparts, and is increasing by 3 months every year. The rural elderly are often reluctant to use services because of the long travel times involved.
- **Access to services** - In a rural context, access to services means physical access, including travelling time, geography, opening hours, local provision of services, availability of public transport and regularity of service.
- **Delivering services** – there may be challenges to deliver cost effective services to rural communities because of the distances involved, the population spread and the fewer opportunities to take advantage of economies of scale. Innovative service delivery and cross agency/partnership working are essential to maximise opportunities to meet the needs of rural communities.

Obligation to take rural needs into account when developing policies/delivering services

Rural proofing is shorthand for a process that involves assessing how policies will work for rural people and places to ensure that the policies are implemented fairly and effectively.

Rural proofing is a commitment by Government to ensure domestic policies take account of rural circumstances and needs. It is a mandatory part of the policy process, which means as policies are developed, policy makers should:

- consider whether their policy is likely to have a different impact in rural areas, because of particular circumstances or needs;
- make proper assessment of those impacts, if they're likely to be significant;
- adjust the policy where appropriate, with solutions to meet rural needs and circumstances.

Rural proofing applies to all policies, programmes and initiatives and it applies to both design and delivery stages. The Government is committed to making rural proofing a reality at national and regional levels.

For more information, see:

<http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/projects/ruralproofing/overview>

Response to consultation questions

1. *Does every library authority have to share a common purpose? Are these purposes complementary and relevant? Are some more important than others? Are there other purposes we should consider?*

CRC is not in a position to comment on this, other than to say that it is important that the needs of rural communities are identified and fully considered when developing policy in this area i.e. any proposed policy needs to be rural proofed (see page 2).

2. *Do you think the current roles as defined for central and local government are still appropriate? Is the 1964 legislative framework still appropriate or does it need review? If so what changes would you like to see? Is there any value in central government having a more direct role in setting the vision and objectives for the library service or is the service better managed entirely at local level.*

CRC is not in a position to comment on this, other than to say that it is important that the needs of rural communities are identified and fully considered when developing policy in this area i.e. any proposed policy needs to be rural proofed (see page 2).

3. *Could (a) central government departments, and (b) local authorities better use the public library service to communicate initiatives and contribute to other public services? Do you have any ideas on how this might work?*

Libraries have enormous potential to help meet the needs of people living in rural areas by signposting and providing access to a range of services. Libraries need to develop more partnership and cross agency working to deliver a wide range of services in rural areas.

For example, libraries can promote or help to provide other services such as benefit and debt advice, housing advice, community police officers, support groups, employment and training advice, health services etc. This may be either by signposting, or by facilitating drop in surgeries.

There is also scope for central government to reach rural communities via rural libraries, especially for consultations, announcements of initiatives/policy changes, and through the provision of broadband access. This may be as simple as rural libraries being asked to display and draw people's attention to certain information.

4. *A recent report by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Libraries, Literacy and Information Management concluded that central Government structures complicate the delivery of library funding and policy. The Report also called into question the suitability of the MLA and ACL and recommended a Library Development Agency. Are there benefits in changing the structures in government? Are there benefits in changing the structures or roles of the public bodies? Is there a value in a greater central function around particular issues? Eg Marketing and publicity, digital services? Do you see any benefit in establishing new national/local structures as set out in Margaret Hodge's essay?*

CRC is not in a position to comment on this, other than to say that it is important that the needs of rural communities are identified and fully considered when developing policy in this area i.e. any proposed policy needs to be rural proofed (see page 2).

5. *In 2007 the Department for Communities and Local Government published Developing the Local Government Services Market: New ways of working and new models of provision within the public library service but only a handful of local authorities currently deliver libraries through a trust or private company. The case studies show that alternative delivery models can be effective so how might we best encourage Local Authorities to explore the opportunities they offer? What other governance models might be suitable for library services or are there barriers to introducing these models? For instance: What could libraries learn*

