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ChangeUp Rural Communities: Infrastructure Needs and the Growth Agenda

North Buckinghamshire Action Plan



March 2006

Buckinghamshire Infrastructure Development Plan Rural Action Plan recommendations

The following Action Plan represents the key actions identified from a comprehensive research project carried out on rural community needs in the North Buckinghamshire and rural Milton Keynes areas. This full report is due to be published alongside the Buckinghamshire Infrastructure Development Plan and this Action Plan is designed to be read alongside this document. As the full report is not yet completed (and is not due to be published for another month) a supporting paper has been provided to give some background detail underpinning the identified actions.

These recommendations set out actions to address all the key issues identified in the research and it is important to bear the following in mind:

- It is highly unlikely that all of the identified actions could be implemented in the short term: there are complex inter-relationships between areas of recommended actions and many rely upon appropriate 'groundwork' being in place before progress can be made in these areas.
- It is important to acknowledge that while some existing resources are available to deliver some elements of this Action Plan and some could be delivered at minimal cost, many of the identified actions would only be feasible where additional resources become available.
- The ChangeUp initiative is a long-term process and it is appropriate that a staged implementation process is used, ensuring that progress in improving rural infrastructure provision occurs in an integrated way, alongside other areas. Progress in implementation in the first few years may require this Action Plan to be reviewed and amended.

Therefore, it is recommended that this Action Plan is used as a 'menu' of possible actions, and that appropriate priorities are identified and agreed by the BIG Consortium.

It is also recommended that the initial priority actions should include some 'quick wins': areas of development where progress has already been made in order to underline the importance of the ChangeUp process and to demonstrate in a tangible way how infrastructure provision in the county can be developed.

A full post has been calculated at £45k to include on costs (pension, NI, management costs etc).
Therefore 0.5 of a post has been calculated as £22.5k and 0.4 of a post as £11.25k.
A daily rate of £200 per day has been used where appropriate.

Actions: Understanding Rural Needs

The development of a rural evidence base, mapping provision of services and activity in rural communities is an important priority. Collation of information and analysis of this information would help to ensure that there was effective input to enable appropriate review of rural infrastructure provision to be carried out. Feedback from direct community development work with rural communities would also help to 'unpack' and gain a better understanding of the needs of rural communities.

In addition to identifying those support services available (mapped through the ChangeUp process) it is important to undertake ongoing recording and monitoring of requests for assistance from rural communities. All those providing support to rural voluntary or community groups would provide input to an agreed single support organisation with the responsibility for co-ordinating the information, collating data, analysing and reporting on it. A shared system and approach, recording the name of the community, the support requested, the issue, the support provided and the short term outcome could then help identify key issues of concern and provide valuable information for future service planning.

Undertaken on an ongoing basis, 6-monthly reports would be useful in building up a clearer picture of current needs and the system could also be used to map changing needs (perhaps over a 2 or 3 year period). This information would be of value to a broad range of stakeholders, including the public sector. The main IDP highlights the need for a countywide database and this is to be supported. It is important that this contains the capability to identify a rural 'subset'.

An initial audit of the delivery of rural infrastructure services and voluntary and community activity should be carried out, co-ordinated by those organisations currently providing infrastructure support for rural communities. This should be followed by the development of a common approach to recording, monitoring and reporting on rural needs, potentially shared by others across the county.

Area	Actions	Action by	When	Cost
Understanding Rural Needs	Carry out mapping work on rural services and activities	RYES	Year 1	0.5 post
	Produce report on current activity and infrastructure support	RYES	Year 1	£22.5k
	Set up a working group to develop simple and sustainable system of recording and monitoring rural support needs	RYES	Year 1	
	Agree common approach to recording and monitoring	Consortium	Year 1	
	Identify appropriate mechanism for collating, analysing and publishing results of monitoring	Consortium	Year 2	
	Develop support (training, basic guide, FAQ) to enable system to be implemented across organisations	Consortium	Year 2	
	Agree lead body for implementing monitoring system	Consortium	Year 1	
	Pilot monitoring system	RYES	Year 2	
	Revise or adapt system	RYES	Year 3	
	Develop monitoring system for review of the project	RYES	Year 2	
	Implement system across participant organisations	RYES	Year 2	
	Carry out first collation and analysis of results	RYES	Year 2	
	Circulate results to all key partners and stakeholders	RYES	Year 2	
	Feed results into Consortium	RYES	Year 2	
	Carry out major review of system to identify required changes, modifications, etc.	RYES	Year 4	

Actions: Key infrastructure support needs

It is important to reinforce the need for the provision of infrastructure support to be based on a strong user focus, with a good understanding of just what user needs are. The research revealed a perception that infrastructure organisations (where users were aware of them) can be distant from the actual concerns of local users. However, it is also useful to acknowledge that in many cases users are at an early stage of development regarding their needs and the possible infrastructure services which are, or could be, available to them. Many groups are poorly linked and networked, isolated, often fairly informal and under some pressure. Research revealed a low level of understanding of what services were available and there was often a tendency to focus on problems, rather than on the required support.

Feedback from users and from the research has indicated two broad areas of infrastructure support required by rural communities: generic and specialist.

Recommendations: Generic support: support services that are required by most frontline organisations on a 'countywide' basis, but which may need to be provided or delivered in a different way to meet the needs of rural communities and to ensure equity of access. These would include the following (with priority indicated as High, Medium and Low):

- Funding advice (H)
- Volunteering and trustee support (recruitment and retention) (H)
- Legal/personnel (M)
- Health and safety (M)
- Marketing (L)
- Finance (M)
- Training (M)
- ICT (L)

The key issues are how these generic services can be delivered on a sustainable and countywide basis and how can they best be 'rural proofed' to make them fit for purpose for rural communities. At this stage of the work, the following have been identified as key immediate support needs. It is important to recognise that through community development (addressed elsewhere), a much broader range of needs are likely to be identified. The identified 'generic' support needs are a particular challenge. Even though they may be required by most frontline groups, they will often need to be rural proofed and provision and delivery adjusted to ensure they are fully accessible on an equitable basis. The recommendation is that a structure is developed whereby there is rural 'input' to the planning, co-ordination and delivery of these services.

It is important that these generic services can be accessed through a user-friendly, structured and integrated approach with a clear 'enquiries point' and an effective structure by which these requests can be signposted to the organisation best placed to provide the particular support needed.

The structure of the Consortium and two Colloquia in Buckinghamshire requires specific actions to be taken to ensure that development of generic infrastructure support services is appropriate for rural communities. The Voluntary Sector Support colloquium will be leading on many of these services and the RYES colloquium should carry out rural proofing of the delivery of these services to ensure that the wider Consortium is aware of the issues and any identified actions.

Area	Actions	Action by	When	Cost
Key infrastructure support needs	<i>See also actions for 'Planning, co-ordination and delivery'</i>			
	Agree nominated representative from RYES to lead on rural issues in the Consortium	RYES	Year 1	0.25 post £12.5k to address this section Year 1
Generic support	Carry out rural proofing on current infrastructure provision	RYES	Year 1	
	Test existing assumptions on key infrastructure needs for rural communities (<i>see 'Understanding Rural Needs'</i>)	RYES	Year 1	
	Identify key issues of concern and priorities for action	RYES	Year 1	
	Raise issues of concern and promote priority actions within the Consortium	RYES	Year 1	
	Develop practical and sustainable actions to address issues of concern and pilot in North Buckinghamshire	Consortium	Year 2	
	Report on pilot work and produce revised recommendations	RYES	Year 3	
Develop planned approach to deliver work across the county	Consortium	Year 3		

Actions: Specialist support: support services that have a clear focus on rural community needs. The research would seem to indicate that specialist, developed expertise, advice and support are required around the following issues

- community facilities (H)
- young people/children (H)
- transport (M)
- social and community enterprise (L)
- affordable housing (H)
- shops (M)

There is some current provision of these support services, but this tends to be patchy and in some cases requires significant development to provide a solid and sustainable base.

Regarding the 6 specific rural specialist services, it is important that these are developed to provide a comprehensive and holistic service. Research is required to develop a clearer idea of the specific needs and level of need for each of these, to plan the appropriate delivery and to ensure that this provision is integrated.

It is vital that work is undertaken to identify the needs relating to current specialist advice and support provision, identify the gaps and the stakeholders and delivery agencies who should be involved in the work. Once this has been completed the 'gaps' can be prioritised into a timed action plan. Appropriate funding bids can then be submitted using a multi – agency approach.

The current Rural Housing Enabler and Rural Transport Partnership Officer posts are an excellent base on which to build this, linked to work carried out by Youth Focus and public sector economic development activity.

Initial work should focus on mapping the need for these services and in the gaps and weaknesses in provision of support. From this a joint approach could then be developed, involving those delivering specialist advice and support, to help encourage a joint approach to be undertaken in relation to research on both need and delivery, looking to set out a strategic approach to the issues and encouraging cross sector working.

Area	Actions	Action by	When	Cost
Key infrastructure support needs	<i>See also 'Understanding Rural Needs'</i>			
	Agree nominated representative from RYES to lead on rural issues	RYES	Year 1	20 days work £4k Year 1
Specialist support	Mapping exercise undertaken to identify current levels of needs in specialist services	RYES	Year 1	
	Produce brief report outlining needs and priorities	RYES	Year 1	
	Mapping exercise undertaken to identify current provision of specialist services	RYES	Year 2	
	Produce brief report outlining strengths, gaps and weaknesses in current provision	RYES	Year 2	
	Organise 1 day conference for all organisations involved in promotion, planning or delivery of specialist services to explore partnership working	RYES	Year 2	
	Develop appropriate mechanisms to support delivery using a multi agency approach.	RYES	Year 2	
	Develop robust and effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for rural specialist support	RYES	Year 3	
	Identify resources required to address gaps in provision	RYES	Year 3	
	Develop and submit appropriate funding bids	RYES	Year 3	
	Pilot development work in key priorities (or where resources have been secured)	RYES	Year 3	
Report on pilot development work				

Actions: Rural Planning, Co-ordination and Delivery Mechanism

This research has underlined the need for frontline rural groups and organisations to be at the centre of the planning and development of infrastructure support. This user focus is central and should run through all elements of infrastructure provision. A key finding from the research is that groups look for a holistic and integrated approach that is simple, easy to access and avoids unnecessary bureaucracy.

There is a long term issue over the potential for a fundamental reconfiguration of the Voluntary and Community Sector infrastructure support to communities and groups, but this is likely to come about some years in the future. What is proposed may be a 'step along the way' and sets out a mechanism by which a better and more effective rural infrastructure provision can be established.

Change is needed to bring about more fundamental and sustainable improvements. This needs to be supported by a joint approach to planning and an agreed and shared understanding of which organisations are providing which services.

The joint planning and delivery of services is vital, particularly when resources are so limited. Agreed priorities for infrastructure organisations should be developed: not every support organisation needs to be able to provide every support service and there are significant opportunities for reconfiguring services to build capacity. The goal should be an effective structure where those organisations with a strong rural focus can use this developed expertise effectively and efficiently alongside the provision of other, 'generic' support services provided by other organisations.

Currently the IDP proposes a Consortium supported by two 'colloquia': the Voluntary Sector Support (VSS) colloquium for the wider voluntary and community sector and a second one working to address Rural, Youth and Equalities Support (RYES) needs. Whilst this approach does have some advantages in that it focuses (to some extent) on the issue of rural needs, the research has identified some issues of concern which need to be addressed about this approach:

ChangeUp is built on principles of partnership and a holistic approach. A key issue is "Reconfiguring provision for greater impact and efficiency" and whilst the two colloquia approach does have some benefits, it was considered that an alternative of supporting the main Consortium through a range of 'single issue' working groups might be more appropriate. Rural communities themselves have expressed a desire for a lack of bureaucracy, transparency, ease of access and a single contact point and any structure should reflect that. Also, in a county as 'rural' as Buckinghamshire, it is considered that rural provision should be 'mainstreamed' and influence all infrastructure organisations and provision.

In order to ensure that the interests of rural communities are served effectively, it is suggested that the following membership would help achieve this. The group should be voluntary and community sector led and should include:

- representative from generic infrastructure providers
- infrastructure organisations delivering infrastructure support to rural communities
- public sector representatives (PCT/local authority - in an advisory capacity)
- representative from Parish Councils
- representative from the Rural Workers Network
- representative from rural community (see 'Networks and Forums')

Area	Actions	Action by	When	Cost
Rural Planning, Co-ordination and Delivery Mechanism	Develop structure, terms of reference, role and reporting structure for colloquium	Consortium	Year 1	0.25 post £12.5k to address this section Year 1
	Identify and agree lead organisation/individuals	Consortium	Year 1	
	Identify key representative organisations	Consortium	Year 1	
	Recruit members	Consortium	Year 1	
	Development session delivered to build detailed 'job description' for the colloquium	RYES	Year 1	
	Refer job description to wider Consortium for consideration and approval	Consortium	Year 1	
	Set up meeting programme	RYES	Year 1	
	Identify key priorities in conjunction with Consortium	RYES	Year 1	
	Deliver half-day development session for Consortium to consider the overall strategy for rural infrastructure provision in Buckinghamshire	RYES	Year 1	
	Review structure and membership of	RYES	Year 2	
Investigate setting up Rural Workers Network	RYES	Year 3		

Actions: Community Development

A clear finding from this research has been the crucial importance of and need for community development for rural communities. Proactive work, seeking out communities in need of developmental support, to build the capacity of local community organisations, facilities and activities is likely to provide significant long and short term benefits for all stakeholders.

Community development is about building active and sustainable communities based on social justice and mutual respect, removing the barriers that prevent people from participating in the issues that affect their lives. Principles of participation, engagement, equality, learning and co-operation, along with giving local people greater control over the decision-making processes which affect their lives can help to address many of the issues of concern highlighted by this research.

Support for parish or community planning process is important as a mechanism for rural communities to work inclusively to address many of the key issues affecting them. Parish plans (or approaches such as the Market Towns healthcheck) can accurately identify needs, build community capacity, address needs and (perhaps very importantly in this context) develop clear links into policy and decision making.

A key recommendation is to focus support available for community development for rural communities. In order to develop this recommendation in a realistic way (whilst also taking into account the need to build networks to develop more effective sharing of knowledge, skills and experience) a suitable model could be to identify priority areas, for example these could be close to major development or targeting vulnerable clients. Within these areas, settlements could be grouped and work undertaken to provide a Community Development worker with responsibility for 15-25 rural settlements.

Community Development work is planned and delivered with a range of communities and stakeholders. This can be done in a variety of ways but should look to link with those involved in Parish Plans, Market Town health Checks. It is essential that the work and recommendations from this work, and the Parish Plans and Market Town Health Checks developed, are linked with and provide a meaningful input to key strategic documents such as Community Strategies, etc. The outputs from this work represent an important part of the 'rural voice' and should be taken into account accordingly.

It will also be vital to link in to the work of the Parish Councils and to help them develop their role and be more effective. Support and training for Community Planning could be offered and any training needs identified. Best Practice Case Studies could be collated and distributed. An Awayday organised for people who have been involved in Parish Planning could be held where people are encouraged to share their experiences and explore how they can begin to deliver the actions identified in their plan.

In addition, practical support through access by all rural communities to small grants funding for community work would also assist in 'pump-priming' community activity.

Area	Actions	Action by	When	Cost
Community Development	Increase the promotion of Parish Plans	RYES	Year 1	1 full time post £45k per annum
	Promotion and communication material developed to help organisations currently undertaking work to identify this as community development	RYES	Year 1	
	Identify priority areas to target Community Development work and Parish plans	RYES	Year 1	
	Identify priority area to act as a pilot project	RYES	Year 1	
	Mapping work undertaken to identify all Community Development work currently being undertaken within rural areas	RYES	Year 1	
	Develop links with Parish Councils	RYES	Year 2	
	Publicise findings from mapping exercise to help raise the profile of Community Development work and publicise range of partners involved	RYES	Year 2	
	Undertake work to help link the work and recommendations from Parish Plan and Market Town health checks into public sector policy and strategic planning	Consortium	Year 2	
	Organise Awayday for rural communities involved in Parish Planning to share their experiences	RYES	Year 2	
	Contact public sector stakeholders and plan meeting and activity programme to develop links between Parish Planning and key policy and strategic documents	Consortium	Year 2	

Actions: Community leadership development

The research showed that many individuals involved in rural voluntary and community activity were participating in and supporting a range of local organisations or groups. These could be formal or informal, with individuals acting as school governors, Village Hall Committee members, Parish Councillors, Parish Planning group member etc. There was significant concern from this key group around the following issues:

- ensuring there were others prepared to undertake these roles in the future
- pressure from increasing bureaucracy
- pressure from increasing concern over litigation
- ensuring there was an inclusive, ‘whole community approach to community development
- that efforts are made to ensure to engage young adults’

It is important to build the capacity of local communities and in addition to providing support for volunteering and for trustees, community leadership development is essential to provide a basis for development. This could be done through a variety of methods including mentoring, buddying, and networking, all having a clear focus on involving and engaging young people. A community leadership programme should be developed and co-ordinated by an appropriate support organisation. Research on similar approaches elsewhere, to capture good practice and to recruit partners should be undertaken.

	Actions	Responsibilities	Timescale	Costs
Community leadership development	Research undertaken to identify other similar projects undertaken to capture good practice	Consortium	Year 1	20 days work £4k Year 1
	Set up activities to work with rural communities to help establish an appropriate Community Capacity programme	Consortium	Year 1	
	Identify potential funding sources	Consortium	Year 1	
	Undertake further research to provide clear evidence of need and priorities for action	Consortium	Year 2	
	Develop detailed project with costings	Consortium	Year 2	
	Submit funding applications	Consortium	Year 2	
	Explore the possibility of establishing a mentoring or buddying project	RYES	Year 2	

Actions: Growth Agenda

Many rural communities in rural North Buckinghamshire were aware of the major growth planned for Milton Keynes but many considered that this was not a major issue of concern. In addition, even among those who did have some worries about the growth of the city, there was very limited understanding of how this would affect rural communities. For many, the focus was largely on how an existing concern, that is the impact of traffic, would be made worse. There are some concerns over the issue of development, but many of these had a much more local focus, often directed at individual local developments

Only in the area close to Milton Keynes boundary were there high levels of concern regarding the Growth Agenda. There are particular challenges around supporting those rural communities that lie outside the Milton Keynes boundary in Aylesbury Vale District, but consider that the development of the city will have a significant impact on their community. Action is required to address the needs of these rural communities. There is significant evidence that rural communities feel threatened, powerless and can find it difficult to engage under these circumstances. It is therefore important to develop a mechanism by which appropriate support, guidance and help can be provided for rural communities.

This should be identified as a key priority for action, linked to action recommended in the Milton Keynes IDP for rural settlements close to the city likely to be affected by growth (see also 'cross border working'). It would be useful to develop a joint Milton Keynes/Aylesbury Vale community development approach to this challenge, bringing together communities with similar concerns.

Those villages likely to be affected should be encouraged to co-operate and work together as a group, alongside those communities within the Milton Keynes Council area. This work should be jointly supported by a partnership approach from the public sector supported by a Community Development worker with a brief to provide appropriate support. This work could form a pathfinder or pilot project where, following results and a review of the process, the approach could be rolled out to other key areas.

Support for parish planning process is also important. This is a crucial mechanism for rural communities to work inclusively to address many of the key issues affecting them. Parish plans (or an equivalent) can accurately identify needs, build community capacity to address those needs and (perhaps very importantly in this context) develop clear links into policy and decision making.

Area	Actions	Action by	When	Cost
Growth Agenda	Identify rural communities with high levels of concern over Milton Keynes growth	RYES	Year 1	0.5 post £22.5k Year 1
	Produce communication material targeted at rural communities acknowledging their concerns over the Growth Agenda	RYES	Year 1	
	Carry out work to link those communities to share concerns and for mutual support	RYES	Year 1	
	Develop links with rural communities in Milton Keynes involved in Growth Agenda	RYES/MKRCG	Year 2	
	Promote work on Parish Planning as a mechanism for developing the community voice and setting out a clear agenda for the development of a rural community	RYES	Year 2	
	Plan event for rural communities concerned about the impact of the Growth Agenda	RYES/MKRCG	Year 2	
	Look to build links between rural communities affected and key agencies involved in Growth Agenda in order to raise rural concerns	RYES/MKRCG	Year 3	
	Increase range of partners involved in the work, with a particular focus on Parish Councils	RYES/MKRCG	Year 3	
	Deliver event for rural communities concerned about the impact of the Growth Agenda			

Actions: Engaging Young People

In current community activity within rural areas and in relation to the important South Midlands Growth Agenda and its impact on rural communities, very low levels of youth involvement can be seen. Where this does occur, the involvement of young people tends to be based around youth-specific issues rather than around broader issues which affect the whole community. In terms of planning for the future, young people tend to be able to make very little impression: they are rarely asked to contribute or to identify what their needs may be, both now and in the future.

Young people represent the coming generation of community leaders, workers and residents and as such it is important to begin to promote a much greater level of active involvement from this group. This should be focused on a comprehensive approach: asking questions about the nature of communities in the future rather than only around the needs of young people. Active involvement requires effort and activity and is not fulfilled through a 'tick box' approach. It needs to be delivered through mechanisms that appreciate and take into account the way young people interact and react, their language and behaviour and that engage young people fully in the process.

Historically, the focus of much work with young people can focus on two issues, both of which can act as barriers to engagement. Firstly, a focus on alternatives to anti-social behaviour can create tension and promote a negative perception of young people. In addition, adults can focus on education, training and development needs mainly in the context of work and career rather than taking a more holistic approach to the development of individual young people.

In many ways there is an attitude of resignation regarding young people: adults are keen to involve them but many feel that it is 'a lost cause'. This is particularly so in the case of those young people who have left the education system; this group (especially young males) is viewed as almost impossible to engage and traditional techniques are often unsuccessful when used.

Area	Actions	Action by	When	Cost
Engaging Young People	Identify and make initial contact with key organisations working to support young people in rural areas (Youth Focus)	RYES	Year 1	40 days work £8k Year 1
	Carry out basic audit of resources and staffing available for work with young people	RYES/YF	Year 1	
	Agree basic principles and priorities for co-ordinated approach for encouraging and supporting involvement of young people in community planning	RYES/YF	Year 1	
	Develop and set out clear and targeted programme for a co-ordinated approach for encouraging and supporting involvement of young people in community planning	RYES/YF	Year 2	
	Produce initial guidance notes/helpsheet on recruiting, developing and promoting involvement of young people in community planning setting out key support on issues including: overall approach, links to the decision-making process, ideas on events and activities, resources and help available	RYES/YF	Year 2	
	Draw up action plan and funding bids to address identified gaps and weaknesses in provision	RYES/YF	Year 2	
	Initial work with key external organisations involved in development, growth agenda, etc to identify ways in which the involvement of young people in planning can be promoted and encouraged	RYES/YF	Year 2	

Actions: Networks and partnerships

A significant finding in the research is the isolation experienced by many of the frontline rural organisations and community groups.

It is important to raise the awareness across rural communities of the benefits of working in partnership and of developing effective links. This can be supported through the process of building forums and networks to share information, skills and best practice, as well as helping to build the collective 'rural voice'.

Area	Actions	Action by	When	Cost
Networks and partnerships	Carry out mapping work on networks and partnerships	RYES	Year 1	40 days work £8k Year 1
	Produce joint information/support materials/case studies outlining the benefits of partnership working	RYES	Year 1	
	Assess strengths and weaknesses of existing network	RYES	Year 1	
	Identify gaps and development opportunities	RYES	Year 2	
	Set up a working group to develop proposals for a sustainable, appropriate and integrated structure of networks and partnerships	Consortium	Year 2	
	Consult widely on the proposals	Consortium	Year 2	
	Set up and deliver event promoting benefits of networks and partnerships	Consortium	Year 2	
	Identify and contact all public, voluntary and community sector workers with a rural remit and notify of developments	Consortium	Year 1	

Actions: Rural Forum and the rural voice

Working in partnership with communities and within community structures such as parish plans has been identified elsewhere in this report as a mechanism for raising the profile of rural communities and for helping to ensure that the needs and views of those communities are heard.

The development of a rural Forum, based on an existing grouping if appropriate, is a priority with an initial meeting held in autumn 2006. This forum would serve two purposes: to help link organisations and communities and to help them network and secondly to help give them a 'channel' to voice their concerns.

This would start with a focus on sharing skills, experience and knowledge. A themed approach (for example, a focus on rural young people) could then be developed, either through annual events or by setting up theme groups. Practical work to contact groups, identify suitable times, dates, venues and to agree priority issues and a programme for the first year could be started in spring 2006.

The initial Rural Forum meeting (see above) would provide an opportunity for organisations to begin share good practice, explore and voice their concerns and to feel less isolated. From this, an inclusive mechanism to identify and priorities issues of concern, and to develop responses could be developed.

It is important to recognise that simply to 'have a voice' is not enough: rural communities need a robust and effective mechanism by which their views and concerns are recognised and acknowledged, and can be used to guide and influence policy and decision makers. This involves ensuring that there are clear links to Community Strategies and that Parish Plans have a clear role and are taken into account in decision-making.

This should not be confined to local and sub-regional work and links to regional and national advocacy and representation are important.

As there is limited awareness of the existing forums, networks and partnerships, a mapping exercise should be undertaken to identify what exists, its role, format, accountability, resources and the voluntary and community representatives. This information could then be collated and publicised on existing Websites.

Area	Actions	Action by	When	Cost
Rural Forum and the 'rural voice'	Identify current groupings with a significant level of representation from rural communities to use as a base for the development of the rural forum	RYES	Year 1	40 days work £8k Year 1
	Develop draft 'role description' for the Forum and circulate widely to encourage feedback and comment	RYES	Year 1	
	Plan and organise initial Rural Forum, using a focus of 'Involving Young People'	RYES/YF/LAs	Year 1	
	Deliver and review initial Rural Forum	RYES	Year 2	
	Identify key policy and decision-making groups with an interest in supporting the Rural Forum	RYES	Year 2	
	Produce forum report and action plan and circulate to rural communities	RYES	Year 2	
	Feedback results to key public sector stakeholders	RYES	Year 2	
	Draft outline programme for future rural forums and circulate for comment	RYES	Year 3	

Actions: Communication and information

In the long term, the development of a single access point for all infrastructure support services would be an important step forward. This would encourage take-up of support, improve access to help and advice and enable more effective marketing and promotion to be undertaken. A single access point would enable needs to be identified at an early stage and ensure help and support is provided quickly, by the most appropriate organisation.

Currently much remains to be done before this can be achieved but a practical step forward would be to adopt a joint, integrated approach to marketing and communication regarding infrastructure. A joint leaflet, highlighting a small number of key 'infrastructure access' points distributed by all stakeholders would act as an interim measure, signposting organisations to the most appropriate contact. This would also provide better marketing and awareness-raising around the range and scope of available support services and provide one way of promoting the idea of frontline organisations developing and responding to change.

The development of accessible and user friendly web sites for infrastructure organisations is a high priority, but a key element of this is the need to develop this in an integrated and holistic way. A key concern for frontline community groups was a lack of awareness and understanding of 'who does what' in infrastructure provision and a lack of clarity over which organisation to approach for help. A simple first step would be for all those involved in providing support to rural communities to ensure that their websites contained links to other infrastructure organisations. In this way, anyone accessing any organisation would have an improved chance to find the organisation they need.

Possible development: a 'virtual' single access point, web-based but with telephone access (through a single number). This would essentially provide a 'gateway' to both generic and specialist information and support, making access much easier: those seeking help would be signposted directly to the appropriate organisations. This would be easy to market and promote and more likely for publicity to be effective, raising the profile of rural issues and increasing the awareness of what support is available.

This single access point would also encourage organisations to be clear about the support services they were offering and to ensure that an integrated approach to provision is adopted.

ChangeUp in the county has developed an integrated newsletter and this would again be a potential helpful support for isolated groups. A generic 'Community Building' newsletter could be produced, raising awareness of opportunities and services supported by case studies and with contributions from individual groups.

All of the above would support the development of an enhanced, two-way information flow: both from and to rural communities, so that they can be more aware of issues and matters of concern and also have a mechanism by which their ideas and concerns can be heard.

Area	Actions	Action by	When	Cost
Communication and information	Develop a single access point for all infrastructure support services encouraging take up of services and improving access to support and advice	Consortium	Year 1	0.5 post £22.5k Year 1
	Production of joint leaflet highlighting key infrastructure access points	Consortium	Year 1	
	Development of accessible and user friendly web sites for infrastructure organisations – ensuring strong links from existing sites	Consortium	Year 1	
	Development of a virtual single access point web based with telephone access.	Consortium	Year 2	
	Market above development through range of methods – press, leaflets, posters, websites etc	Consortium	Year 2	
	Production of a generic community newsletter material	RYES	Year 2	
	Investigate coverage of Village Information points for rural communities	RYES	Year 2	
	Development and production of directory of infrastructure services and support paper and electronic versions produced and promoted	Consortium	Year 2	
Action day for all infrastructure organisations to explore how they can work more effectively together to ensure they are signposting effectively	Consortium	Year 2		

Actions: ICT

Research did not highlight significant needs around the issue of ICT, but it is important to bear in mind that this may reflect a lack of awareness of the potential for developing ICT mechanisms for support and information flow. In view of the relatively low current level of development, improving infrastructure for and around ICT needs to be addressed using a long term approach. Hardware and equipment is seen as less of a priority, although it is important to ensure that each community has good access to a PC and ancillary equipment for everyone.

For frontline organisations, ICT is a tool and maintenance and support may be more important. The development of a ‘circuit rider’ support service for voluntary and community groups needs to be in place for ‘on the spot’ support. This is likely to be a long term and part of the wider IDP in order to serve the needs of the countywide VCS.

Area	Actions	Action by	When	Cost
ICT	Identify organisation with ICT capability to take on initial rural ICT co-ordination role	RYES	Year 1	40 days work £8k Year 1
	Develop shared database of rural contacts (as part of countywide database)	Consortium	Year 1	
	Set up ‘web-space’ for virtual rural ICT update point	Consortium	Year 1	
	Identify, collate and promote information useful to rural community groups	RYES	Year 2	
	Gather data on rural community ICT needs, focusing on software, hardware, training and access to the internet	Consortium	Year 2	
	Develop, if appropriate, a project to provide a ‘circuit rider’ ICT support service for voluntary and community sector groups (this may need to be approached on a countywide basis rather than simply focused on rural groups)	Consortium	Year 3	