

Rural Accessibility to Services Framework for the West Midlands: Executive Summary

Report to Advantage West Midlands
(AWM)

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Executive Summary

1. In the autumn, 2006, SQW Consulting – in collaboration with Rural Innovation – was commissioned by AWM to develop a Rural Accessibility to Services Framework. As stated in the original Terms of Reference, the purpose of the exercise was to “*establish a common regional understanding of “Rural Service Accessibility” and develop an agenda for change and improvement that will then be used to facilitate effective targeting of activity; both those of the Agency and its partners*”.

Approaching the study

2. The study was divided into two broad phases of work. The first was concerned with a desk-based review which considered the national and regional policy context and then sought to establish a baseline with regard to access to services in rural parts of the West Midlands. However, notwithstanding the volume of material, the review process was challenging: different documents used different definitions and thresholds and, as a result, compiling an accurate picture of regional conditions was not possible. Moreover, questions arose with regard to the value of much of the data – even in its own terms – and the insights it provided in relation to access to services; the conclusion was drawn that the data said more about service delivery in relation to predefined targets than to the consequences, on the ground, for rural communities, and the individuals and businesses within them.
3. The second, and more substantive, phase of work was concerned with developing a Rural Accessibility to Services Framework. This process was completed iteratively, working closely with a Challenge Group which consisted of provider, public, private and social interests and had been established – by Advantage West Midlands – to steer the progress of the study as a whole.

The Rural Accessibility to Services Framework

4. The Challenge Group agreed that the aim of the Framework should be “**to improve access for those most in need to services and opportunities which will make the greatest difference to their lives**”.
5. Hence, the Framework was premised on the intrinsic relationship between access to services and (i) the ability of individuals and businesses to participate fully in everyday life; and (ii) the opportunities and pressures linked to sustaining rural communities. Three immediate consequences followed:
 - first, it emphasised the essential nature of service provision which is integral to everyday life; whilst the Framework focused on situations in which access to services was especially problematic, the importance of what might be described as the “critical service provision” should not be overlooked
 - second, it meant that the Framework ought to be of great value with respect to the social pillar of the Regional Rural Delivery Framework. There has long been a

concern that there is no real “champion” for this element of the RRDF and the Rural Accessibility to Services Framework provides an important opportunity to advance key priorities within it

- third, it meant that the Framework should provide the foundation for establishing a clear and consistent understanding of which people and which places are particularly vulnerable to the implications of poor access to services and/or could gain most through specific improvements to them. The corollary is that the Framework is not about access for the sake of access. Nor is it about transport services / infrastructures *per se*.
6. The Framework itself was then defined along three key dimensions: specific services/opportunities; the people at greatest risk of social or economic exclusion in rural parts of the West Midlands; and the places in which they lived (and/or worked).
 7. Simply defining access to services issues on a consistent basis and in relation to these three key dimensions was considered, by the cross-sectoral Challenge Group, to be one important step forward. A second was the acknowledgement that, at least in principle, four very different types of solution might be developed in response: taking services to people; taking people to services; developing virtual solutions; and developing infrastructures to effect better services and build community capacity.
 8. The question of which solution(s) might be appropriate in which set of circumstances was then given some consideration. However it was agreed that there could be no blueprint and, indeed, that locally-owned solutions would often be needed. To advance these, two “Framework Tools” were produced – a project planning tool and a checklist which might be used to test and refine emerging options.
 9. The Framework itself was therefore very simple. It could be summarised in terms of a three-dimensional analysis of issues and the development of appropriate solutions in response, facilitated by the Framework Tools. However its value, potentially, lay in the fact that its widespread adoption – at Agency, regional and local levels – should facilitate a more consistent approach that is capable of drawing in and on practice elsewhere in a way that transcends administrative and service boundaries and addresses consistently the overall aim of improv[ing] access for those most in need to services and opportunities which will make the greatest difference to their lives.
 10. Within this context, a series of “uses” for the Framework were identified and a detailed Action Plan was developed in response. This implicated a wide range of organisations at regional and local levels. Importantly, it also identified mechanisms for cascading the use of the Framework to sub-regional and local organisations.

Wider findings and their implications

11. The process of developing the Framework was exploratory and iterative and, in some respects, it was as important as the final product. It pointed to a number of key conclusions with regard to the importance of Access to Services in general:

- first, access to services matters because it is critical in affording individuals a reasonable quality of life. It ought therefore to be a priority for a wide range of policy makers and service deliverers
 - second, in seeking to ensure reasonable access to services, market solutions will often prevail alongside those provided by the public and third sectors, but in rural areas, there are supply side challenges reflecting the economics of service delivery. People who are vulnerable – particularly those without private means of transport – may be seriously disadvantaged
 - third, the existing metrics of performance in relation to “access to services” do not capture the real issues
 - fourth, the provision of – and access to – services is also integrally related to what makes a sustainable rural community
 - finally, locally appropriate solutions are required to address the challenges linked to access to services at both levels (i.e. individual and community).
12. Within this broad context, a number of conclusions and implications were identified of relevance to partners from across the West Midlands:
- regional strategies – particularly the West Midlands Economic Strategy (WMES) and the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) – need to recognise the inter-relationship between processes of accessibility and the causes of disadvantage (and subsequently social and economic exclusion)
 - particularly in the RSS (and, more locally, Local Development Frameworks (LDFs)), the links between providing services, accessing those services, and securing sustainable rural communities must also be understood and supported
 - there is a need for innovation and creativity in responding to access to services challenges – recognising the implications of changing lifestyles and the opportunities afforded by technology (notably ICT, so long as the infrastructure is in place and people are able to use it)
 - the vital role of the voluntary and community sector with regard to the development of appropriate solutions and, more generally, the foundations of sustainable communities, ought to be recognised more fully and supported
 - regional Agencies need to devote time and attention to developing appropriate metrics, recognising the close links between access to services and social and economic exclusion, and sustainable rural communities more generally.
13. Finally – and as something of a post-script to the main study – the report sought to reflect on the implications of the Framework for AWM in the context, specifically, of the Sub-National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration (SNR). This was published by government after the Framework was substantially complete. Four key observations were made in this regard:

- SNR is important in terms of the future priorities of AWM (and all other RDAs). Key elements of it include a stronger focus on the delivery of economic growth; a commitment to devolve delivery where appropriate to do so; and the coming together of the RES and RSS under the leadership of the RDA
- given the links between the provision of, and access to, services, and the foundations of sustainable rural communities, AWM – as it becomes Regional Planning Body – will continue to have an important role to play with regard to access to services, even though the relationship with the new RDA Tasking Framework is indirect and complicated
- AWM ought to involve itself in access to services predominantly through its influencing and leadership roles which are recognised by government as Strategic Added Value functions and outputs. AWM should not, generally, involve itself in direct delivery
- given the devolution imperative signalled in SNR and in its influencing/leadership capacity, AWM needs to engage with:
 - (i) Local Strategic Partnerships through Local Area Agreements (LAAs) and potentially Multi Area Agreements (MAAs) to ensure that the issues relating to access to services in rural areas are not overlooked and that the Framework developed through this study is embedded and used
 - (ii) Local authorities to ensure that LDF processes also reflect on – and respond to – the clear relationship with sustainable rural communities.