Research Briefing 2



# Issues affecting education and training in rural areas

**Research and Good Practice Team**

**Learning and Skills Council National Office**

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Introduction

There are many benefits of living in a rural area. Peaceful surroundings, lack of pollution and distance from frantic city life are just a few. However, the factors that make it so pleasant to live in a rural area may also create barriers for providers of education and training in offering a broad curriculum and difficulties for learners in accessing provision.

The LSC is undertaking a programme of research to find out what the key issues for providers and learners in rural areas are. The programme includes:

* a report describing the issues affecting education and training in rural areas and identifying the strategies that have been successful in overcoming barriers which will be published in early 2003
* a good practice guide based on the above which will be published in spring 2003
* a study commissioned by National Rates Advisory Group (NRAG), on whether it costs more to deliver provision in different areas of the country
* research about funding learning in rural areas (Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA)) (August 2003)
* research undertaken by local LSCs in rural areas.

A rural issues task group has been set up to steer the research and to advise the LSC. The group will oversee the work being undertaken to ensure that LSC policy and practice fit with the government’s agenda on rural issues.

This briefing note sets out the key issues which affect education and training in rural areas and the strategies to tackle them.

Key issues and solutions

The five key issues identified in the research are:

1. isolation of provider and learner

2. transport

3. costs of provision

4. work based learning

5. basic skills.

The paragraphs below describe these issues and list the strategies which have been successful in overcoming the barriers identified.

1. Isolation of provider and learner

In areas where the population is sparsely distributed, many learners will live some distance from their nearest provider which, in many cases, will be the sole provider for that area. There is pressure on these providers to offer a broad curriculum which, coupled with small class sizes, can make it difficult for them to achieve economies of scale.

* Information and communications technology (ICT)

ICT can play an important role in overcoming the isolation of learners and providers. Firstly, it can enable providers that are located some distance away from each other to communicate and share resources. Secondly, online learning is of immense benefit to individual learners who are isolated and live some distance away from any provider.

For ICT to be of maximum benefit to learners it is vital that software and hardware are of good quality and that learning materials are appropriate. It is also essential that technical support is available to these learners.

As a medium of learning, ICT is more effective on some courses than others. Where it is effective, learners who study largely through ICT provision also have regular face-to-face contact with tutors and other learners.

* Marketing

Effective marketing may help recruit learners who live some distance away from the provider. To succeed, however, it needs to be well planned. In one successful practice example, colleges pooled their resources to mount a marketing campaign with an area-wide focus.

* Outreach and mobile provision

Taking provision to learners through outreach centres and mobile units may also help to overcome their isolation. Outreach is more likely to be successful if the need and the preferred mode, location and timing of learning has been carefully researched.

2. Transport

In many rural areas with a sparsely distributed population, flexible and affordable public transport is not available. This limits the choice of provider for learners who do not have their own transport.

Various strategies have been adopted. They include:

* subsidised rail or bus schemes organised by local education authorities (LEAs) in partnership with transport providers
* transport arranged by providers (funded from a number of sources, including the LSC’s Learner Support Fund and from successful bids for Government funding such as the Innovative Bus Scheme)
* assistance for individual learners such as payment of taxi fares, subsidised driving lessons and schemes to provide mopeds

A partnership approach to solving transport issues has been recommended in the recent report by Steer Davies Gleave for the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), *Transport for Students in Further Education*.

3. Costs of provision

Many providers in rural areas believe that they face **additional costs** compared with providers in urban areas. Whilst the study of area costs commissioned by NRAG (October 2002) did not find a correlation between sparsity and financial health and quality measures, it did recommend that further research is undertaken to examine information at the level of the individual provider.

The following economic issues have been raised:

* a small population in a provider’s catchment area may mean that there are fewer learners in each class, and small classes are not usually cost-effective
* many rural providers experience a low turnover of staff and, although an experienced and settled workforce can be beneficial for learners, it can also have cost implications for providers
* many rural providers use project funding to ensure broad and balanced provision but project funding can be expensive in terms of the time staff have to spend bidding for it, and in managing and reporting on the projects.
* Partnership and collaboration

Collaboration between partners can lower economic barriers and make provision less isolated. In examples of successful collaboration:

* provision is planned strategically to meet demand
* providers share resources including staff expertise.

By planning provision strategically across more than one provider, gaps in the curriculum can be filled and an economically viable number of learners achieved. The area reviews to be carried out under the Success for All strategy will have a strategic focus and will help identify the areas in which collaboration is likely to bring most benefit.

Collaborating providers have successfully created posts for staff to work across more than one provider and have shared resources with partner organisations such as Connexions.

4. Work-based learning

In most rural areas there are more small businesses than in urban areas. The difficulties experienced in engaging employers can be more severe with small and medium-sized employers. For example, conventional methods of organising training, where learners have to follow a timetable, are not necessarily convenient for small and medium-sized employers.

* Strategies that have been helpful in making employer based provision work include:
* surveys of employees to find out their learning needs
* strong partnerships with funding organisations
* appointment of ‘Learning Champions’
* different modes of teaching, training and learning.

5. Basic Skills

People in sparsely populated areas, in common with people everywhere, may be reluctant to enrol for courses of training in basic skills because they do not want others to find out that they need help with such skills. Those living in a small community, however, may feel that they will be more easily identified.

Providers sensitive to this concern have ‘wrapped up’ tuition in basic skills as part of, for example, information technology (IT) or vocational programmes.

Future development

The Rural Issues Task Group will continue to steer policy and research in this area. Further research briefings will be produced as the work develops.

Further reading

The Countryside Agency (2002) *Rural Proofing in 2001-02*

The Countryside Agency (2002) *Two Wheels Work: A Good Practice Guide for Developing and Implementing Wheels to Work Schemes*

Department for Transport (2000) *Local Government and the Regions, Social Exclusion and the Provision and Availability of Public Transport*

Further Education Development Agency (2000) *Student transport: unfair or just unequal?*

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2001) *Work and family life in rural communities*

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2000) *Young People and Transport in Rural Areas: Access and Opportunity*

Steer Davies Gleave (2002) *Transport for Students in Further Education. Final Report 2002.* DfES

Steer Davies Gleave (2002) *Transport for Students in Further Education. Executive Summary and Good Practice Guide,* DfES

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