

This report provides an overview of results from a survey and data analysis about services in rural Wales undertaken by the Wales Rural Observatory during 2007.

KEY FINDINGS

- One quarter of town and community council clerks in rural Wales considered overall service provision in their local area to be good or very good, 48% felt it was satisfactory and 23% believed it to be poor or very poor.
- Levels of local service provision and rates of satisfaction were generally higher in the larger rural settlements.
- 32% of rural communities had a food only shop, which was the same as in 2004
- 17% had a bank or building society, compared with 15% with a bank and 10% with a building society in 2004
- 73% of communities contained a public house, compared with 92% in 2004
- 34% had a restaurant, 22% possessed a café and 24% contained a takeaway
- There was a GP in 30% of rural communities and 13% had a health centre, compared with 32% with a GP in 2004
- A dentist surgery was present in 14% of communities. The figure in 2004 was 16%
- 26% of rural communities contained a pharmacy or chemist, compared with 25% in 2004
- Half of responding clerks felt that public transport provision in their local area had remained the same over the past five years. 27% believed it had changed for the better, and 23% perceived a decline in this service.
- 46% of clerks considered that the police and police presence had remained the same over the past five years. 19% noted an improvement in the service, and 31% believed it had worsened.
- 55% of clerks were of the opinion that community spirit had stayed the same over the past five years. For 29% of responding clerks community spirit had got worse, and for 11% it had improved.
- 61% of clerks stated that the availability of affordable housing had worsened over the past five years. Only 8% considered that it had got better, and 31% of clerks suggested that it had worsened.
- The main issues that clerks identified as affecting the standard of life in their local area were: affordable housing; shops and post office

The Research

By a team at Cardiff University for the Wales Rural Observatory (WRO)



provision; employment; keeping young people in the area; police service

BACKGROUND

The provision of services in rural areas is an important concern for policy makers, politicians and social commentators. Problems associated with service provision are significant, and they encompass all of rural Wales. In many cases, problems with services are more acute in rural areas than in urban ones, due to the wider dispersion of populations and the decrease in locally based services.

This report is based on findings from a survey of Town and Community Council clerks in Wales conducted by the Wales Rural Observatory (WRO) in 2007 and spatial analyses of Point X data. There are seven main areas covered by the report: quality of services; change in the provision of services; service availability; public space and the environment; welfare; different people, different services; about your council.

The survey examined the changing nature and perceptions of the quality of local service provision in rural Wales. This survey was supported by One Voice Wales and followed on from a similar one conducted by the WRO in 2004 (which in turn was based on a 1996 survey).

The report also incorporates data from Point X, which is a database that provides the most comprehensive and current source of information on the locations of a wide range of services. This allowed the questionnaire to move beyond quantitative data collection and towards a more qualitative appraisal of service provision and availability.

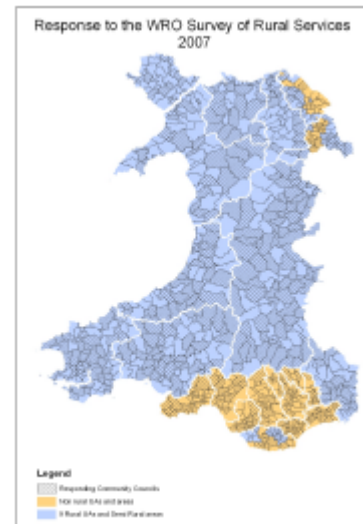
METHODS

The methods employed were an analysis of the Point X data and a postal survey of Town and Community Council clerks. Point X is designed to report 'a specific named entity undertaking a distinct activity at a discrete location' (Point X, 2006). The Point X data were spatially joined to existing data sets held by the Wales Rural Observatory. This enabled the Point X services to be linked to Welsh community boundaries and to be partitioned by population size. It also allowed the Point X data to be amalgamated with the questionnaire data for each community. To compare the spatial information gathered from the Point X data with data gathered from the postal survey both data sets were aggregated using population bands. The population bands used were

comparable with the 2004 survey of rural services in Wales.

The questionnaire was sent out, in English and Welsh, to the clerks of all the Town and Community Councils in Wales. Many of the questions were based on the 2004 survey, adapted to add to the information we could gain from the Point X data. The questionnaire asked clerks to reflect on the quality and changing nature of services in their local area.

Out of 569 Town and Community Councils in rural Wales, 323 questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 57%. The response rate provided a representative sample in terms of population size and geographical location, as is illustrated in the following figure.



The statistical data from the questionnaire was analysed using SPSS, and the qualitative responses were coded thematically.

FINDINGS

Overall when accessing service provision in local communities, 25% of clerks in rural Wales felt that service provision was good or very good, 47% considered it satisfactory and 23% considered it poor or very poor.

Shops

The proportion of rural communities with food only shops in 2007 was 68%, which was the same as in 2004. 66% of rural communities had a non-food only shop, and 40% contained a general store.

Half of clerks in rural communities rated the level of retail provision in their local area as poor or very poor, compared to 17% who rated it as good or very good. 33% of clerks responded that the service provision was satisfactory.

Banks and Building Societies

In 2007, 17% of communities in rural Wales had a bank or building society compared with 15% with a bank in 2004, and 10% with a building society. The provision of banks and building societies varied according to the size of rural communities, with this facility being present in 66% of communities with populations of 4000 or more but only 2% of communities containing less than 1000 people.

61% of clerks rated the provision of banks and building societies as poor or very poor. 16% considered the service was very good or good, and 17% believed it was satisfactory.

Public Houses

73% of communities in rural Wales had a public house, compared with 92% in 2004. While provision of this service did increase with population size, a percentage in all the population bands had a public house.

43% of respondents felt the provision of public houses was good or very good and only 16% rated it as poor or very poor.

Food Outlets

Take-aways were the most numerous food outlet, constituting half of all food outlets in rural Wales.

The highest proportion of respondents believed the provision of restaurants, cafes and other food outlets was poor or very poor, with 38% of respondents selecting this response. 30% felt it was satisfactory and 28% rated this service as good or very good.

Medical Services

30% of rural communities had a GP, 23% possessed a pharmacy or chemist and only 14% had a dental surgery. In 2004, 32% of rural communities had a GP, a quarter had a chemist or pharmacy and 16% had a dentist.

The provision of medical services in smaller communities in rural Wales was particularly poor, with 46% of GPs, 69% of health centres, 70% of dental surgeries and 62% of pharmacies in communities with a population of at least 4000 people. The concentration of these services can pose problems for people who are reliant on public transport to get to them.

Despite the low level of medical service provision in smaller communities, 68% of clerks in rural Wales

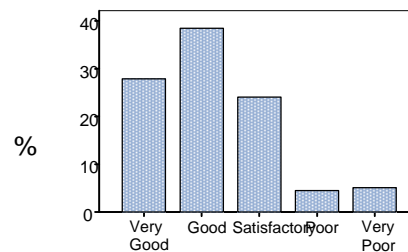
considered that these services were very good, good or satisfactory.

Educational Establishments

79% of communities in rural Wales had an educational establishment. The provision of educational establishments varied with population, with 32% of rural communities with a population of between 0 and 400 people containing at least one, compared with 98% of rural communities with a population over 4000 people.

The figure below shows that there was a high level of satisfaction with the provision of schools.

How do you rate the provision of schools in your area?

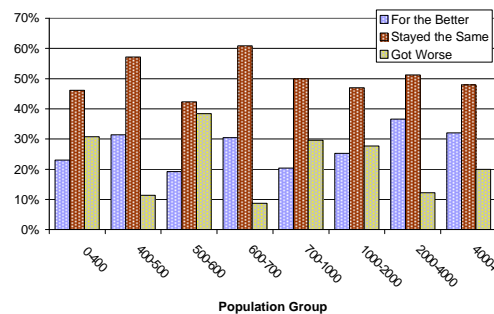


Public Transport

97% of rural communities had at least one bus stop or train station in 2007.

Half of respondents considered that public transport had remained the same over the past five years, although more respondents felt it had changed for the better (27%), than for the worse (23%). This was the case across all populations sizes (see below) For most of the clerks who selected the 'stayed the same' response, the quality of service had remained poor as illustrated in the quote below. The main reasons given for this were infrequent and unreliable service.

'There has never been a regular public transport facility in this area and this has not changed' - Town and Community Clerk



Affordable Housing

Affordable housing was one of the main problems highlighted by clerks for their local communities. With 61% of clerks stated that its availability had got worse over the past five years, and 31% commented that it had stayed the same.

'Any house that comes on the market for sale or rent cannot be bought by local people' – Town and Community Clerk

The main problems mentioned by respondents in connection with affordable housing were: the lack of housing developments catering for the needs of locals, in particular young people and young couples; the in-movement of outsider groups; and the purchase of second or holiday homes. In particular, clerks were concerned about young people having to move away because they could not afford to purchase property in the area

'It's virtually impossible for young people to think of buying a home in this area. I think that's totally shameful and as a result rural areas like this are losing their young people.' – Town and Community Clerk

There were positive developments mentioned by some respondents, such as local authority policies for affordable housing, but overall there was a prevailing sense of pessimism about affordable housing provision.

Police and Policing

Out of 569 rural Town and Community Councils, only 89 had a police station in their area. This means that 84% of communities in rural Wales did not have a police station in 2007.

46% of respondents considered that the police service or police presence in their local area had stayed the same since 2004, with 19% of the opinion that it had improved and 31% feeling that this service had got worse.

'Due to the development of community policing, the area is far better covered than before. Officers now really work with the community to prioritise problems' – Town and Community Clerk

Community Spirit

A slight majority of clerks in rural Wales (55%) considered that community spirit in their local area had remained the same in the past five years. A further 29% felt it had got worse and 11% stated that it had changed for the better.

'There is traditionally a good community spirit with most residents knowing who their neighbours are. There are lots of activities arranged by volunteers' – Town and Community Clerk

There were a wide range of activities that communities organised, including various social and cultural, religious and sporting events.

Public Space

The survey reveals that there were 709 playgrounds in rural Wales in 2007.

90% of rural communities had at least one park or public green space in their local community. In addition, 45% of communities had areas that could be hired for organised sport.

69% of communities had facilities for young people and children. These included play areas, playing fields, sports facilities, after school clubs, youth clubs and organised sports.

31% of responding Town or Community Councils had, at some time, participated in Best Kept Village competition and 12% had taken part in Britain in Bloom.

Recycling

79% of rural communities had some form of recycling provision. Paper recycling was the most significant recycling service provided, with 73% of communities having this service. A further 69% of communities had cans and plastics recycling facilities, 65% had a bottle bank and 46% had a clothes recycling scheme available. In about two thirds of communities, recycling was provided by the local authority at the kerbside. Only 21% of communities did not have access to recycling facilities.

Half of all clerks responded that the recycling was adequate in their local area.

Welfare

Citizens Advice Bureaux were the most frequent welfare advice service available in rural Wales, being present in 19% of communities.

61% of respondents felt the provision of welfare was adequate in their local area.

Assessment of availability of information was varied according to community size with 72% of clerks in communities with 0 – 400 people reporting inadequate provision, compared with 45% in the 4000+ population size.

Changing Populations

Only 21% of clerks believed the numbers of young people in their local area had increased in the past five years. 84% of respondents perceived an increase in the elderly population over the past five years.

54% of clerks were of the opinion that the number of families in their local area had increased over the past five years, and over the same time period 88% of clerks believed that the number of people who were not born in Wales who were living in their local area had increased. In addition, 45% of respondents thought that the number of holiday and second homes in their local area had increased in recent years.

Unequal Access to Services

46% of clerks considered that the current state of service provision in their local area did not provide equal access for everyone in the community. Those who could not drive, older people and disabled people were the main groups identified as being unable to access services.

'Residents with no access to a car aren't able to access local services. In a rural area like this one you have to travel a lot' – Town and Community Clerk.

For further information

The full report, Rural Services Survey 2008 is published by the WRO.

It is available free as a download from: www.walesruralobservatory.org.uk

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