

The way ahead for rural services

*A guide to good practice
in locating rural services*



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Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
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A mobile library at St Buryan, Cornwall. Photographer: Liane Bradbrook.

A library within a village shop in Norfolk. Photographer: Rural Development Commission.

A mobile police station at Charmouth, Dorset. Photographer: Liane Bradbrook.

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The way ahead for rural services

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

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PART 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 *The purpose of this guide*

1.0.1 This guide has been prepared to assist public sector decision-makers, service planners and practitioners who are responsible for assessing the implications of closing, opening or restructuring outlets which provide public services to people in rural areas. It focuses on approaches to assessing the wider external impact of location decisions. While this guide is specifically tailored for use in England, the principles behind it can be applied in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

1.0.2 This guide complements the Countryside Agency's *Rural proofing policy-makers' checklist*¹. The *policy-makers' checklist* is a screening tool, designed to help policy-makers fulfil the first step of the rural proofing commitment. It should be applied at the early stages of policy making, although it also serves as a check at the implementation and evaluation stages. This good practice guide is a tool to assess the impacts of any contemplated change to rural service provision at the local and sub-regional level, such as provision of a GP surgery or a school reorganisation.

1.1 *Which services does this guide apply to?*

1.1.1 This guide is relevant to all public services that are delivered to people living in rural areas, such as schools and hospitals. Services may be provided directly by the public sector, or through private-sector organisations funded or regulated by central or local government. A rural area is commonly defined as excluding any town with a population of 10,000 or more, although facilities serving rural areas may be located in larger towns and this needs to be taken into account in decision-making. Further information on the availability of rural services can be found in the Countryside Agency's *Rural services in 2000*².

1.2 *Who should use the guide?*

1.2.1 The guide should help two distinct user groups. Firstly, national policy-makers in central departments should use it in developing their own guidance for those directly responsible for making decisions about provision of services, showing them how those decisions should take into account the needs of rural residents. Secondly, service planners and providers should use the guide to help them assess the impact of a contemplated change in the provision of services to rural areas.

¹ **The Countryside Agency's rural proofing policy-makers' checklist can be downloaded from**
www.countryside.gov.uk/ruralproofing

² **The Countryside Agency's *Rural services in 2000* can be downloaded from**
www.countryside.gov.uk/ruralservices

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1.3 How to use the guide

- 1.3.1 This good practice guide complements other good practice guides already available, such as the *HM Treasury Green Book*³. Therefore, this guide may be used in conjunction with general good practice guides and also with service-specific guides, such as *The Code of Practice on Post Office Closures*⁴.
- 1.3.2 The guide is not intended as a comprehensive guide to assessing service change decisions. It is intended to help with assessing the impact on rural users as early as possible for decisions affecting individual service premises.
- 1.3.3 This good practice guide is split into three parts, with this introduction forming Part 1. Part 2 comprises checklists of issues to be considered by national policy-makers, and service planners and providers. The checklists may be used as a reminder of issues likely to arise when making decisions that affect rural services.
- 1.3.4 The third part provides more detailed guidance including three recommended approaches for assessing external costs to users of rural services. These approaches may be adopted when decisions are being made that directly affect rural communities. Examples of existing good practice are also included, identifying what service policy-makers and providers have done in the past to ensure that rural residents have an acceptable standard of services.
- 1.3.5 This guide has been developed from research undertaken for DEFRA (formerly DETR) by Ecotec Research and Consulting Limited. The technical appendices to the research provide more information on the modelling approaches described later in this guide.⁵

³ **The HM Treasury Green Book can be downloaded from**
www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/Economic_Data_and_Tools/greenbook/data_greenbook_index.cfm

⁴ **The Code of Practice on Post Office Closures can be downloaded from**
www.postwatch.co.uk/index2.html

⁵ **The Ecotec appendices can be downloaded from**
www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/ruralwp/index.htm

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PART 2: CHECKLIST OF ISSUES

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2.0 *National policy-makers*

- Do service-specific guidelines on the approach to assessing location decisions take into account the particular **needs of rural residents**?
 - Are the **potential costs to service users** associated with location decisions treated adequately in departmental and agency **guidelines on assessment methods**?
 - Could the **modelling-based approaches** described in this good practice guide add value to current practice for **assessing costs to service users**?
 - Do the modelling-based approaches discussed in this guide require specific adaptation to meet the needs of your service and **what tools could be developed to help service planners** consider costs to service users during the assessment process?
 - Are guidelines in place to advise practitioners on the **information or data needed** to inform the assessment process?
 - Does policy and guidance to service planners consider the transport or access requirements of **vulnerable service users**?
 - Would **service standards for access by users in rural locations** assist service planners in making location decisions?
 - Do practitioners have access to appropriate guidance on undertaking **population needs assessments** so that information on vulnerable groups is available to help in assessing location decisions?
 - Do national guidelines encourage service planners to consider the wider social and economic **impact on market towns** when assessing service closure or restructuring proposals?
 - Does national guidance encourage service planners to consider the **feasibility of alternatives to service closure or restructuring in rural areas**, where financial costs need to be reduced? This could include sharing premises with other agencies, providing outreach services, developing remote access facilities or contracting out services to the voluntary or private sector.
 - Are examples of **good practice approaches** collected and **distributed** to service planners?
-

2.1 *Service planners and providers*

- Do local processes and tools for assessing service location decisions take into account the particular **needs of rural residents**?
 - Could the **modelling-based approaches** described in this guide add value to current local practice for **assessing costs to service users**?
 - Do the modelling-based approaches discussed in this guide require specific adaptation to meet the needs of your service and what **tools could be developed** to help service planners consider costs to service users during the assessment process?
 - What type of **information or data** would be needed to improve consideration of costs to service users as part of assessment process?
 - **Are information strategies adequate** to ensure the necessary information is collected and available to help in assessing location decisions?
 - Do **locally set criteria** for assessing location decisions consider the transport and access requirements of **vulnerable service users**?
 - Could **local service standards for access by rural users** or vulnerable groups help the assessment process?
 - Is service planning informed by **population needs assessments** so that information on vulnerable groups is available to help in assessing location decisions?
 - Do methods for assessing service location decisions consider the wider social and economic **impact on market towns**? If not, consider how they could be improved.
 - Where service closure in rural areas is being considered as a way of reducing financial costs, are **alternative ways of maintaining the service routinely considered**? This could include sharing premises with other agencies to reduce overheads, providing outreach services, developing remote access facilities or contracting out services to the private or voluntary sector.
 - Are examples of **good practice in other rural areas** considered when planning services?
-

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*PART 3: ASSESSING THE IMPACT ON USERS
OF SERVICES IN RURAL AREAS*

PART 3: ASSESSING THE IMPACT ON USERS OF SERVICES IN RURAL AREAS

3.0 Introduction

3.0.1 This part provides guidance on how policy-makers and service planners and providers can take users' costs into account. Three approaches are outlined below, with more information available on the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) website ⁶. Specific guidance is also provided on considering social inclusion and environmental effects and taking the needs of vulnerable groups into account.

3.1 Taking users' costs into account

3.1.1 Good information on the needs, characteristics and experiences of users clearly has a central role to play in many aspects of providing quality public services. This guide focuses on the data required to inform decisions on opening, restructuring or closing public service facilities. In practice, however, service planners will usually need to collect a range of data on users for other purposes and the most efficient approach will be to collect the data suggested here as part of this wider process. Two main types of information are relevant:

- a) Routine information on service users.
 - Users' names and addresses and details of the facilities they use, with postcodes, following BS 7666 ⁷ – basic information now available for many services.
 - How often each facility is used by each user or class of user.
 - How they get there: car (own, shared, lift), public transport (bus, train) or other method (motorcycle, cycle, walk); and ideally
 - Whether users generally make a special trip to the facilities or visit while out anyway to do other things.
 - For those who do not come by car, whether one is potentially available for such trips.
- b) Information on responses to previous closures and rationalisations and/or openings.
 - The alternative facility used after closure of an outlet and the reasons for the choice. For a facility being opened, the issue would be which facility had been used previously.
 - Users' perceptions of how their travel costs changed as a result of the closure or opening – including factors such as parking costs and travel times.
 - Associated issues such as users' perceptions of how the convenience of accessing the service changed.
 - How frequency of use changed because the alternative facility was less convenient or more costly (or because a more convenient and or cheaper alternative was opened).

⁶ **The Ecotec appendices can be downloaded from**
www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/ruralwp/index.htm

⁷ **BS 7666 Spatial datasets for geographic referencing is a national standard for recording property locations which all public authorities are being encouraged to use. It can be ordered online at**
www.bsi-global.com/ **or by phoning 020 8996 9001**

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- 3.1.2 The challenge to service planners is to balance improved accuracy from more complex approaches with the process costs involved, adopting approaches appropriate to the likely significance of the issues involved in the particular decision at hand.
- 3.1.3 Three approaches are set out below, in order of increasing demands of analysis. It should be recognised that the resulting estimates of costs to users will always be subject to margins of uncertainty.

3.2 Modelling approaches

Approach 1	Ready reckoner
Use	For decisions on smaller facilities, such as local community facilities, e.g. a local primary school.
Method	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Develop a map-based zoning system for the area covering the facility and its catchment, including the location of the relevant alternative outlets.2) Estimate the 'crow-fly' distances from the centre of each zone to the facility whose future is at issue and the alternatives.3) Estimate the numbers from each zone currently using the facility to which the decision relates.4) Calculate the effects of closure on the distances users travel on the assumption that they reassign themselves to the (next) nearest service outlet to their home when a facility closes.5) Calculate the impact on costs per visit on the assumption that costs average £0.24 per km⁸.6) Calculate annual costs to users based on usage of the facility concerned.
Other considerations	Feasibility, cost and convenience of accessing alternative facilities by public transport. Effects on existing public transport facilities, e.g. loss or increase of customer base.
Advantages	Provides an estimate of the potential scale of costs to users. Simple and cost-effective approach that uses readily available data.
Disadvantages	A very general approach with associated margins of error.

⁸ Based on Department for Transport advised values and an average speed of 30mph

Approach 2	Modified modelling
Use	For decisions on medium-sized facilities, such as services that serve a number of communities.
Method	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Incorporate user data into a Geographic Information System (GIS) system including a suitable zoning system with users assigned to zones based on their postcodes. 2) Estimate the numbers travelling from each zone to each facility in the initial situation from the user data. 3) Estimate the 'crow-fly' distances from the centre of each zone to each facility. 4) Calculate the costs involved per visit in terms of time, vehicle operating costs and accidents based upon DfT Guidance ⁹ and the 'crow-fly' distances. 5) Estimate the numbers likely to travel to each facility after the rationalisation, closure or opening based on the evidence on how people choose which service outlet to use ¹⁰. 6) Recalculate the costs involved after rationalisation, closure or opening and compare these with the costs in the initial situation. 7) Gross up estimates on the basis of the available information on frequency of use to provide an estimate of total annual cost which can be brought into the overall assessment.
Other considerations	<p>The approach can be improved by incorporating a separate analysis of costs to public transport users. This would require both data on the numbers from each zone who use public transport and a digitised public transport network. Such an assessment may involve the following steps:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Estimate the numbers travelling from each zone to each facility by public transport in the initial situation. 2) Calculate the costs involved in terms of walk and ride times, fares and interchange penalties. 3) Estimate the numbers likely to travel to each facility after rationalisation, closure or opening. 4) Calculate users' incremental costs per visit following rationalisation, closure or opening. 5) Gross up the estimates to provide figures for annual costs based on whatever user data is available.
Advantages	Provides a user cost based on hard data.
Disadvantages	<p>Requires specialist input to set-up and run the model. Requires more complex data, which can be expensive to obtain.</p>

⁹ Drawn in the supporting research from the *Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (DMRB)13* (see www.highways.gov.uk) and guidance issued for the multi-modal studies (see www.dft.gov.uk)

¹⁰ Research suggested that in some cases, such as Job Centres, users overwhelmingly choose to use the nearest available facility. In others, more complex choice patterns emerged, such as users adopting the next most popular choice of people living in their area (libraries) or using the facility closest to that which was closed (hospitals)

Approach 3	Full modelling
Use	For decisions on large facilities, such as services with a sub-regional focus, e.g. a hospital serving a sub-region.
Method	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Assign all users and the service provision outlets to the nearest node on the road network based on their postcodes. Define a matrix of numbers of movements between each pair of nodes to access services. 2) Create a path matrix showing the most likely route between each pair of nodes on the network. Estimate the distances travelled on different types of road in each case. 3) Estimate the numbers travelling from each zone to each facility in the initial situation from the user data. 4) Calculate the costs involved per visit in terms of time, vehicle operating costs and accidents based upon DfT Guidance ¹¹ and the distances travelled as estimated in points 1 to 3 above. 5) Estimate the numbers likely to travel to each facility after rationalisation, closure or opening based on the evidence on how people choose which service outlet to use. 6) Recalculate the costs involved after rationalisation, closure or opening and compare these with the costs in the initial situation. 7) Gross up estimates on the basis of the available information on frequency of use to provide an estimate of total annual cost which can be brought into the overall assessment.
Other considerations	<p>The approach can be improved by incorporating a separate analysis of costs to public transport users. This would require both data on the numbers from each zone who use public transport and a digitised public transport network. Such an assessment may involve the following steps:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Estimate the numbers travelling from each zone to each facility by public transport in the initial situation. 2) Calculate the costs involved in terms of walk and ride times, fares and interchange penalties. 3) Estimate the numbers likely to travel to each facility after rationalisation, closure or opening. 4) Calculate users' incremental costs per visit following rationalisation, closure or opening. 5) Gross up the estimates to provide figures for annual costs based on whatever user data is available. <p>The extent to which service location decisions would materially affect future population growth or the economic viability of market towns.</p>
Advantages	Has the potential to increase the accuracy of travel-cost estimates by up to 20% compared with the <i>Modified modelling approach</i> .
Disadvantages	Expensive method which requires specialist input. Requires an extensive amount of hard data, both on users and modes of travel.

¹¹ Drawn in the supporting research from the *Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (DMRB)13* (see www.highways.gov.uk) and guidance issued for the multi-modal studies (see www.dft.gov.uk)

3.3 *Vulnerable groups*

- 3.3.1 All public service providers are encouraged to consider the particular transport needs of vulnerable groups when assessing service location decisions, even where this cannot be measured. A number of agencies responsible for delivering public services have established accessibility criteria and thresholds for 'time and distance to the nearest available service' which are applied when assessing service location options. Standard practice could include consulting transport providers during service reviews to explore the availability of subsidised services and fares, the availability of services appropriate for those with disabilities, routes and scheduling.

Examples of existing guidance

The *Good Practice Guide on Courthouse Closure* published by the Central Council of Magistrates' Courts Committees (CCMCC) offers guidance to MCCs considering courthouse closure, guides MCCs through the key stages of such a consideration, identifies a timetable for the consultation and closure process, and provides working examples of good practice for reference and possible use. One of the suggested elements to be included in information for consultees is communication links.

Local education authorities (LEAs) must provide free transport if they consider it necessary to enable a pupil to attend school, and they may help other pupils with their fares. Free transport is always necessary for a pupil of compulsory school age (5-16) who attends the nearest suitable school if it is beyond the statutory walking distance of two miles for children under eight years and three for children aged eight and above. This ensures that education for compulsory school age pupils is accessible to rural communities.

Service Standards for Library Services (Department for Culture, Media and Sport) states that in County Council areas 85% of residents should live within 2 miles of a library facility (this target rises to 100% for Unitary Authority areas).

3.4 *Environmental effects*

- 3.4.1 The current recommended approach for considering environmental effects is to use the predicted impact on car mileage travelled, or in the case of the 'ready reckoner' approach, total distance travelled. This can be used as an indicator of the scale of the adverse impacts of closures of local facilities on the environment.
- 3.4.2 Whether environmental effects are likely to be significant in practice clearly depends on whether decisions would have a significant effect on traffic levels and the routes to the service. The environmental sensitivity of the areas and routes to be affected should also be considered. For public service facility closure, the likely effect of the potential future use could also be taken into account, where this information is available – for example, whether it will increase traffic levels, or require additional land-take.

3.5 Social inclusion

3.5.1 The Rural White Paper explains how isolation from key public services can compound problems associated with poverty and other forms of deprivation. It commits Government departments to consider the particular needs of residents of rural areas in their approach to public service provision. For service planning, there are several ways of implementing this policy, including:

- 1) Agencies responsible for public service provision should give service planners who are making service location decisions clear guidelines on how to take account of levels of deprivation in the affected areas.
- 2) There should be a presumption against the withdrawal of services in highly deprived neighbourhoods.
- 3) Consideration of the effects on disadvantaged people should be required when assessing options for rationalising facilities.
- 4) Innovative ways should be explored to establish or retain services in areas where there are known to be large numbers of people at risk of social exclusion.

3.5.2 The Index of Multiple Deprivation ¹² is a useful source of information for identifying disadvantaged communities. But in rural areas disadvantaged people are widely dispersed, so it is important to assess and meet the needs of individuals wherever they live, rather than targeting resources only at particular neighbourhoods.

Examples of existing guidance

Policy advice to Local Education Authorities contains a strong presumption against the closure of rural schools, particularly in disadvantaged areas. This does not mean that no rural school should ever close, but the case for closure should be strong and the proposals clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area. Decisions regarding closure proposals are taken alongside a host of factors including, for example, curriculum. They are also taken in the light of information on the proportion of pupils receiving school meals, levels of local unemployment, local incomes and indicators of deprivation. This policy is supported by provision of funding to contribute to the additional costs associated with delivering education services in rural areas.

The Department for Work and Pensions has a presumption against the withdrawal of services in rural and urban disadvantaged areas. It has developed a number of specific initiatives directed at increasing the availability of community-based and online job centre services in areas with very high levels of unemployment.

Library service planners are required to consider how their services can provide opportunities for lifelong learning in regeneration areas. Library authorities must also review access and charging policy in the light of social inclusion policy objectives. Performance standards include criteria relating to these issues.

¹² **More details can be downloaded from**
www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/indices.asp

Examples of existing guidance

Fair Access to Care Services provides councils with a framework for determining eligibility for adult social care, and proposes that eligibility for individuals will be determined by an assessment of their needs¹³. These needs will be reviewed at regular intervals, and their continuing eligibility decided. When using the eligibility framework, councils will take into account their resources, the needs within the population they serve, and the likely costs of services. As such, the guidance is generic to all types of council. This needs approach to assessment will not make assumptions about an individual's circumstances. For example, assumptions will not be based on where they live, but will take account of the impact on their living arrangements, independence and the type of help and services they may require.

3.6 Assessing potential social and economic effects

3.6.1 Recommendations in the Rural White Paper encourage public service providers to consider the social and economic impact of service location decisions on market towns. The closure of a major facility (such as a hospital or school) may affect residents' shopping patterns and/or residential desirability. Local businesses may experience a decline in passing trade. From this perspective it will be important to consider, for example, whether former service facilities could be turned to an alternative, valuable community use.

3.7 Innovative approaches to safeguarding or extending rural service provision

Joint service planning

3.7.1 The use of public services in rural areas is often affected by the difficulties or expense of getting to them. This can mean that such services are less likely to be used, which can in some cases lead to pressure for closure. However, as an alternative to closure, service providers could consider the feasibility of co-locating services (such as primary health facilities, community education, childcare, libraries, day-care services, youth clubs and training facilities). This approach can reduce both costs to users and providers' overheads, and maximise the uptake of services through cross-referral.

¹³ **Fair Access to Care Services** can be downloaded from www.doh.gov.uk/scg/facs/index.htm or by phoning the Department of Health on 0870 155 5455

Examples of existing good practice – The Waters Upton co-location project

The parish of Waters Upton, in Shropshire, comprises four villages. Over several years, services in Waters Upton have steadily declined, including loss of the village school and the petrol station, which also housed the village shop and post office.

The co-location project is being led by the parish council and has strong local support. The project is providing a purpose-built two-storey centre including a shop, post office, information and communications technology (ICT) access centre, meeting room and community office to deliver a range of services. The centre also includes a three-bedroom flat, owned by a housing association, for use by the manager of the shop and post office.

Other services to be offered from the centre include: ICT and ICT training, adult education, police, citizens' advice bureau, library, solicitors' legal advice surgery, prescription collection and delivery, hairdressing, credit union, homework club, MP's surgery, junior internet club, rural stress helpdesk, chiropodist, tax and benefits information, parish councillors' office and information point and a cash-point facility.

This is a well-planned, innovative project. It will deliver a wide range of services, both face-to-face and by use of ICT, and makes key services more accessible to people living in and around Waters Upton.

Joint planning of transport services

- 3.7.2 For those agencies with a statutory duty to provide transport for clients, joint contracting arrangements with voluntary or private transport providers can reduce the overall cost to each agency. By working in partnership to assess transport requirements, service planners can gain an overview of demand in a particular area. Such information can enable private and voluntary sector transport providers to tailor their services to meet local needs, or to stimulate the provision of new transport services. Local authority transport co-ordination officers and Rural Transport Partnership officers can assist other agencies in all sectors with planning strategic transport for vulnerable groups.

Outreach services

- 3.7.3 Doorstep services play an important role in overcoming barriers to accessing services, particularly for vulnerable groups. Certain primary health services, care services and employment services are increasingly delivered on an outreach basis in rural communities and other service planners could consider the role outreach plays in improving accessibility. Although the costs of outreach services can be high, overall savings can be made by joint use of both buildings and support services.

Examples of existing good practice

The Social Service Inspectorate report *Inspection of Community Care in Rural Communities*¹⁴ highlighted examples of best practice in improving access to day care for the elderly in rural areas. In Durham, day care for the elderly is provided in residential homes near to where service users live. Bedfordshire County Council purchases care services from neighbouring social services departments where their services are more accessible to particular individuals. Dorset, Bedfordshire and Lincolnshire County Councils have negotiated with housing agencies to provide day care in the communal lounges of sheltered housing units in villages.

The Countryside Agency has produced two useful documents that examine case study evidence on joint service provision throughout rural England (*The costs of the joint provision of services in rural communities* and *The joint provision of services 2000*)¹⁵. Each report draws general conclusions on the success of the case studies examined and tries to highlight general features of good practice.

3.8 Consultation

- 3.8.1 The Rural White Paper, through the rural services standard¹⁶, states that public service providers have a duty to tell residents of rural areas what they can expect in terms of the availability and quality of public services. Consulting service users and other interested parties is an important way to ensure the process of service planning and re-organisation is transparent.
- 3.8.2 Rural service planners and providers should ensure they consult all affected parties on any decisions affecting rural service provision. Consultation should be timely, well publicised and easily accessible to all interested bodies.

¹⁴ ***Inspection of Community Care in Rural Communities* can be downloaded from**
www.doh.gov.uk/scg/adult98.htm

¹⁵ ***The costs of the joint provision of services in rural communities* and *The joint provision of services 2000* can be ordered from Countryside Agency publications on 0870 120 6466**
www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/ruralwp/index.htm

¹⁶ **The rural services standard can be downloaded from**
www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/ruralwp/index.htm

For advice and help on provision of rural services, rural proofing, *Rural services in 2000* and examples of good practice, please contact:

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Copies of this guide and the Ecotec Report Technical Appendices can be downloaded from the DEFRA website at www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/ruralwp/index.htm

