

APRIL 2010

Giving rural clout in Barnsley!

This is the story of how One Barnsley kick-started the process of involving local people in looking at how to get rural issues discussed, taken seriously and included.

Conference: Exploring Rural Barnsley

The conference was run by One Barnsley (the Local Strategic Partnership) in January 2010. The idea was to include a wide range of local people with an interest in rural areas, and:

- » raise the profile of rural Barnsley
- » start defining what and where was rural in Barnsley
- » debate the differences and similarities between rural and urban areas
- » look at ways Barnsley could make the most of its rural assets

Since the conference there has been some really practical action and a potential shift in the way rural communities will be included in the council and its partners' plans.

“Classifying things as rural can raise problems, instead of focusing on solutions. The issues might be the same but the solutions can be different!”

(Conference participant)

Not always the good life

- » Many people think of Barnsley as just a former industrial northern town. But 20 per cent of people in the Metropolitan Borough of Barnsley live in rural areas, and about 60 per cent of land in the borough is classed as rural.
- » Rural communities are often hidden and overlooked. The word ‘rural’ can conjure up simple and idealised images of chocolate box scenery and the good life.
- » It’s increasingly recognised that many people living in rural areas face isolation and poverty, and don’t always have a full chance to get involved in how their local services are designed and run.
- » The government produced its Rural Strategy in 2004, which included “social justice for all – tackling rural social exclusion and providing fair access to series and opportunities for all rural people” as one of its three priorities. The Commission for Rural Communities was set up in 2005 specifically to tackle rural disadvantage and try to ensure everyone is able to play a full part in society.
- » Rural communities are now often included in local authority audits about social inclusion, but the challenge is how to really involve local people, rather than just ticking boxes.



Rural communities can be hidden and overlooked

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How the conference came about

“We always knew we needed to include wider stakeholders in the work, rather than just a small group of officers”

(Peter Mirfin of One Barnsley)

One Barnsley is the area’s Local Strategic Partnership. It brings together representatives from the local statutory, voluntary, community and private sectors to address local problems, allocate funding, discuss strategies and initiatives. It aims to encourage joint working and community involvement, and prevent different agencies that share aims working in isolation.

When One Barnsley was restructured recently, it reviewed how it was dealing with rural issues. The Rural Agenda Development Group was set up to look at which parts of Barnsley were rural; differences between rural and urban areas; and whether the council and its partners were doing enough.

After some initial research and analysis, the group knew it was crucial to consult with a wider, more varied

audience and the idea of the conference came up. 77 people came to the conference which One Barnsley promoted by:

- » spending time and attention on producing relevant and catchy flyers that included images of rural Barnsley and thought-provoking questions
- » using a snowball approach to publicity; inviting anyone whose work could potentially affect rural areas and encouraging them to forward the invitation on
- » working with the local voluntary and community sector (including Voluntary Action Barnsley) to get the word out
- » deciding to use a Barnsley town centre venue. This meant that people from the eastern and western edges of the borough had easier and quicker transport routes to the conference

So what defines rural in Barnsley?

“There’s pressure on using the national definition of rural. If you’re not classed as rural by DEFRA, you can’t access funding. But maybe it’s easier for us to define what is rural...”

(Conference participant)

There is a technical and national definition of what makes an area rural, based on settlement patterns and population sparsity figures. It was developed by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Countryside Agency and the Office for National Statistics and you can find out more at www.defra.gov.uk/evidence/statistics/rural/rural-definition.htm.

Barnsley is divided into 52 neighbourhood areas that follow natural rather than electoral boundaries. You can find out more at www.barnsley.gov.uk/bguk/Economic_Finance/Central%20Research%20Team/Local%20Information%20System.

If you apply the national definition of rural to Barnsley’s 52 neighbourhoods, then 10 of them have over 90 per cent of their population living in a rural area.

You can see from the map that the five western and five eastern neighbourhoods can easily be identified as rural. They are:

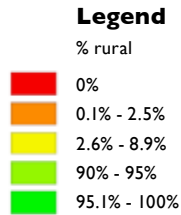
- » East (mainly ex-coalfield areas) – Houghton, Brierley, Grimethorpe, Thurnscoe East, Thurnscoe West
- » West (Pennine fringe) – Penistone, Silkstone, Thurlstone, Thurgoland and Birdwell

“The council’s definition of rural deprivation can be different to those at ground level”

(Conference participant)

One of the main things discussed was the fact that these technical definitions don’t take into account other things that people find important in defining where they live, such as the look and feel of a place.

Barnsley neighbourhoods, approximate rural population



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What do rural communities in Barnsley want?

“Do we need a cabinet member with a rural portfolio? Or should the Local Strategic Partnership have a rural partnership? Do we need a rural champion?”

(Conference participant)

The conference was a starting point for getting a group of relevant people thinking about how to raise the profile of rural Barnsley, and to look at how local people can be properly involved in planning and organising local services.

It included speakers from the NHS, South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive, and Barnsley Council’s Housing Department.

People were split into four different discussion groups – and these six themes came up consistently in all the groups as important rural issues:

- » **Economy and employment**
- » **Tourism**
- » **Transport and access to services**
- » **Broadband**
- » **Housing**
- » **Community Empowerment**

There were also important discussions about whether issues and opportunities were actually because an area was rural, or because of other factors such as poverty. For instance, one of the presentations

looked at differences in health between rural and urban areas. Indicators initially showed that things like mortality rates were similar in rural and urban Barnsley. However, a closer look at the figures revealed that there was a seven and half year difference in life expectancy between women in east rural Barnsley and west rural Barnsley.

This led to some stimulating discussions about not ‘lumping all rural areas together’, and the importance of taking the whole range of local circumstances, experiences and activities into account.

There was also broad agreement that rural issues should not be treated in isolation; and good ways needed to be found to integrate rural communities’ needs into existing statutory structures and mechanisms – so that rural voices are heard from planning through to services.

People also recognised that a lot of things already working for urban communities would fit rural circumstances well too, although they might sometimes need ‘a bit of tweaking’.

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Some of the things people said about the six common themes:

- » Economy and employment
“There isn’t really a clear picture about economic development and what is wanted or needed in rural areas. For instance, there’s a big opportunity for there to be more jobs where people live because of climate change.”
- » Tourism
“Maybe we need to think about cheaper accommodation?”
- » Broadband
“Broadband is important for economic development so rural needs should be reflected in borough-wide digital inclusion projects.”
- » Housing
“Affordable housing is an issue, but also potentially an opportunity in stalled developments for housing that is appropriate for both older and younger people.”
- » Transport and access to services
“There’s been a study into rural car sharing that show lift-hares are well established. We also need to look at a regulated transport service, and subsidise non-profitable routes.”
- » Community Empowerment
“How do we give rural clout!?”



Are there opportunities for jobs because of climate change?

What happened next...

- » A new volunteer car sharing scheme is about to be set up in rural Barnsley, thanks to joint work with Sheffield Community Transport.
- » Rural Action Yorkshire (RAY) is a charity that works to improve the quality of life. One Barnsley is now working with Rural Action Yorkshire to ensure that Barnsley Council consistently uses community-led planning.
- » An expert advisor on broadband in rural areas is now funded through the Partnership, exploring how to improve services in areas with poor coverage.
- » One Barnsley is now working with Leeds City Region to look at raising rural issues at this strategic level.
- » More conferences and focus groups are being planned so that the voices of people from rural areas will be included in future plans and solutions in rural Barnsley.

To find out more about the conference and what has been happening in rural Barnsley since, contact **Peter Mirfin** at One Barnsley on **01226 773 433** or **petermirfin@barnsley.gov.uk**. See also case studies of rural activity in ‘Partnership working between the voluntary and community sector in addressing the needs of rural communities’; (Voices April 2010). ‘Giving Rural Clout in Barnsley!’ is authored by Liz Kettle.

For the Regional Empowerment Partnership contact COGS, **0114 268 7070**, **mail@cogs.uk.net**. More VOICES are available on the regional empowerment website **www.yhep.org.uk**



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