

Access to Services

One of the roles of Cheshire Community Action is to champion the concerns of rural communities and to communicate this to decision makers in order to influence policy, strategy and ultimately service provision.

Following our Members evening held in April 2008, attendees gave us a clear mandate to hold an event on access to services in rural areas.

So we held an event to discuss access to services with two presentations: one from Jenny Lees, Cheshire County Council's Lead Officer for compiling the Cheshire Accessibility Strategy, and another from Anne Barlow and Mike Barker from Antrobus speaking about how their community has provided essential services which have proved invaluable to those in the village. For example, their community shop is run entirely by volunteers, and all surpluses generated by the shop are reinvested into other community activities.

The speakers gave two different perspectives on the issue of access to services, one from that of a Local Authority Strategy and another from the grassroots / community perspective. This was followed by round table workshops with structured questions to encourage positive discussion on the topic.

We asked attendees to discuss and debate what services they have in their community.

Cheshire Community Action, formerly Cheshire Community Council, is a local charity dedicated to helping you develop your local communities through self-help, encouragement and support.

We are committed to providing funding advice and support for projects which will protect and enhance the communities of Cheshire, Warrington and Halton, building strong and active communities.

Established in 1930.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Cheshire Community Action (formerly Cheshire Community Council)

We found that over 80% of the 27 people who attended currently have access to bus services, public houses, primary schools, playgroups/nurseries, village halls, local shops (not Post Offices), library services, recreation areas and employment.

Then we asked:

What are the most essential services for a community?

- 64% said transport / bus services
- 57% said Village Halls / Community Centres
- 54% said local shops
- 50% said Doctor's Surgery / Health Clinic
- 39% said Post Office

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Other services such as **schools** and facilities, **activities for young people** and also leisure facilities for **older people** were rated with very high importance. **Service stations, pharmacies and recreation areas** were also deemed as vital to local communities.

Three other issues came out: Firstly, the lack of **visible policing** – people want to see more Police Officers on the beat to make them feel safer and; Secondly **home broadband services** so that people can access high speed internet. Increasingly more information is being distributed by email and on websites. With the fast development of technology and more services being provided over the internet, people in rural areas need to be able to access this with a good quality and reliable internet connection. Thirdly, issues around **emergency services** using satellite navigation had caused problems with call out times in some cases.

What services have been lost from rural Cheshire and why?

The workshop discussions highlighted some of the issues around services that have already disappeared in rural Cheshire and the reasons for this.

Transport services, community buildings, Post Offices and local shops, village halls, facilities for young and older people all featured highly in people's lists of key services that had been lost. Generally speaking the **lack of use** of these services was seen as the main reason for this. **Depopulation** was also a major contributing factor to this loss of service. This led to discussions on the wider issues of the planning system and provision of **affordable housing** to retain the population and therefore the services. Local shops have also suffered from the intense competition from **big chain supermarkets** to the point where they cannot compete on price.

The **changing nature of agricultural services** was also discussed. This is a complex issue with the increasingly larger farms replacing smaller ones and the changing nature of the workforce, services and economic activity that surrounds it.

There were also concerns that access to health services had and will continue to reduce due to the **amalgamation of clinics** into larger units, hence taking health services further away from rural communities.

Furthermore, **regulations** set by Government and Local Authorities were felt to restrict some of the progress of communities that are actively trying to fill in the service gaps.

What action can be taken?

- Use the services provided. The term: “**use them or lose them**” was used, and loyalty schemes.
- Raise awareness, improve communication about services and their successes – “**services need to meet the needs of users and not the wishes of the providers**”
- **Community Led Planning** can help capture the demand for services and improve communication
- Support for local **community champions** who can act and encourage local communities to think outside the box with innovative ideas
- More **mobile** services or combined / **multi-use** services e.g. shop in the pub
- **Pester power** – some call it lobbying! But this was seen as a crucial factor for changing services

So what happens next?

Cheshire Community Action will use the information collected to feed into the current consultation being carried out by Cheshire County Council on Accessibility Planning. We will also be disseminating our findings to decision makers in the emerging Cheshire Unitary Authorities and our partners at a regional level to ensure that the voice of local communities is heard. The feedback we have had from this event was extremely positive and we hope to continue with these types of events to strengthen the community voice and help communities to network and share good practice.

Note: A wide range of rural representatives attended including village halls, Parish Councils, Local Authority Councillors and Officers, Parish Plan groups and other community groups. The aim of the event was to establish an overview of the current level of service delivery in rural Cheshire, share examples of good practice, discuss the issues surrounding service access and explore constructive solutions to solving some of the problems. *But most importantly to listen to what communities have to say about service delivery in order to inform decision making.*