

SOCIAL SERVICES IN RURAL AND REMOTE AREAS

Children and families living in rural and often remote areas of New Zealand face significant problems in accessing services they need, from basic facilities such as banking and public transport, to more specialised services such as counselling, social work, family support. This creates a complex set of challenges for providers and other professionals working to support rural families.

SSPA members working with families in rural and remote areas of Aotearoa face unique challenges not experienced in urban and metropolitan areas.

This issues paper reflects the experiences of those that deliver services in rural areas. It is intended to promote understanding and discussion aimed at finding solutions that enable consistent quality service provision to rural New Zealand children, families and communities.

This paper outlines three key issues:

- Families' experience of isolation, poverty and lack of access to services
- Funding models and levels that do not take account of unique rural service delivery challenges
- Challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified and experienced staff.

We make recommendations for how we can approach the shared task of ensuring all communities in Aotearoa have reasonable access to the services they need and the services that support rural communities .

Rural providers are working with complex social problems driven by isolation and compounded by poverty. They are often the only helping agency in small population centres.

A new funding model is needed that supports the sustainability of providers working in rural and remote communities.

Rural providers need to be funded at a level that enables them to pay fair and competitive pay rates for social workers and other staff.

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FAMILY ISOLATION, POVERTY AND LACK OF ACCESS TO SERVICES

Rural providers are working with complex social problems driven by isolation and poverty

Social complexities in rural areas are not well understood by many in government. Those working in rural communities see a wide range of social issues. Many rural areas exhibit high deprivation factors:

- **Poverty** – low income families are often drawn to rural areas due to the lower cost of rental accommodation
- **Isolation** – rural areas often lack public transport services to travel between towns or to the main centres.
- **Lack of access to services** – as well as transport challenges, services are not always locally based and/or lack a community presence, affecting access for service users. Under-funded services may often have long waiting lists, such as for counselling. Few prevention-focused services are available and there is very limited availability of specialist services for high need areas such as family violence, sexual violence, suicide and depression.
- **Difficulty in accessing entitlements** - the nearest Work and Income office may be some distance away with no public transport. There are connectivity issues in rural areas limiting on-line services, and there is a need for advocacy particularly with clients who may have difficulty communicating their needs over the phone.
- **High farm suicide rates and poor mental health** – farming families face different pressures, including having the ability to travel off-farm for health and wellbeing appointments. This is due to the high work load and lack of finances to pay for staff to cover them while they are off the farm.
- A range of **housing issues** including a shortage of social housing and rental housing in many rural areas without any local emergency accommodation, leading to many living in substandard housing (over-crowded homes or families living in a sleep-out or caravan) with an impact on their health. Pressure on housing in rural areas, including papakainga, is growing due to the high cost of housing in urban areas.
- As outlined above, very limited **public transport**, if any.
- High levels of **family violence**, with limited services in rural locations, particularly for those using violence and/or those wanting to self-refer as opposed to referrals through justice pathways.

Families and elevated risk factors

In Golden Bay we have concerns for farm staff and their whanau. We have increased risk factors for children who come with dairy staff who only have seasonal contracts. These families have no networks in the very rural and isolated areas their employment requires them to live. This means children are often moving schools and communities, their needs are often missed and recently these families are often migrant workers with English as a second language, which just adds to their vulnerabilities and abilities to access services. Increased risk factors and very hard for services to reach.

(Mohua Social Services)

With a limited range of specialist and government services available to respond to these complex problems affecting families, locally-based providers need to operate as a community 'hub', often providing supportive services that are un-funded. Community providers often have to work in creative ways and wear a variety of different hats to meet the needs in their communities. The current funding silos and partial funding models do not recognise or support this.

Social service practice in rural communities is different and challenging

Building trust and engagement with services and with workers is important in rural localities. A lack of trust is often perpetuated by 'out of town' services withdrawing due to a lack of numbers. This leads to an initial lack of engagement from rural families, until they can trust that a service is reliable and meaningful for them. Some rural providers report that there can be a tendency for communities and clients to be more 'set in their ways' and reluctant to make changes. This is a significant hurdle to improving health and well-being with a high level of skill and commitment of time required.

Providers note that when going into very isolated areas, the tikanga can vary from location to location. Staff working in these areas need to be knowledgeable about tikanga and culturally competent to work with families whilst maintaining tikanga in accordance with the prevailing customs.

Travel impact for clients

Funding for transportation and low frequency of bus services. An example of this was a pregnant client in need of transportation to medical services.

Another client had a medical emergency and was out on an ambulance to Thames but had no way to get back to Manaia.

(Coromandel Independent Living Trust)

With home-visiting a common delivery mode for our rural workforce, isolation adds to the risks they face. Providers report that their workers will often travel into areas where there is limited or no mobile phone coverage. This means that two workers are required to home-visit in these circumstances to maintain safety.

Having a reliable vehicle is also essential and many services are not able to provide a vehicle for their staff to use. The use of private vehicles is also a risk, making staff identifiable in smaller

communities outside of their work time. Reimbursing staff for work-related travel is an added expense that is currently not funded by government agencies.

Community providers are often the only helping agency in their area

Government decisions about the location and mode of their service delivery has impacted on communities and on providers.

Government services have largely withdrawn from a physical presence in many smaller centres, leaving community agencies as the primary point of assistance and contact. Centralisation of services to the largest town or city in the area means that the smaller towns miss out on services. This restricts access for service users, often because of transport difficulties.

Rural providers report that they regularly transport their clients to access services and provide them with the advocacy they require. This is time-consuming and expensive. There are also challenges for 'out of town' providers including building relationships and collaborating with local services.

Distance and home visiting

There is a huge gap in transport in Horowhenua. There is no bus service between Foxton, Foxton Beach and Shannon with Levin. In order for families in these areas to get anywhere, they need their own transport. This means SuperGrans has to go to them at our cost.

Government has moved increasingly towards online and call centre access to services, and these can be problematic for rural and remote communities. Access to online services is difficult, especially for low income families. Broadband and mobile phone coverage is often patchy or may be non-existent. Clients often require advocacy and support to communicate their needs effectively. Those unfamiliar with navigating online services need help to do so.

Providers feel they are picking up the slack from government's withdrawal from the regions, without recognition of their role in supporting communities with high deprivation factors. Those services that are based in smaller centres and rural areas are faced with community expectations that they will provide all services needed (whether funded for them or not).

CURRENT FUNDING FAILS TO RECOGNISE UNIQUE RURAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Travel costs are a significant factor

The current funding models do not adequately take account of specific rural factors associated with travel, such as:

- More rugged and reliable vehicles are needed for travel on rural roads – there are few inexpensive vehicle options available. In many rural areas, the roads are in poor condition and subject to flash flooding regularly. This generates costs as well as presenting travel-related risks.
- The nature of the travel means there is high wear and tear on vehicles, requiring more frequent servicing and replacement of vehicles.
- Frequent need to transport people or resources means a suitable vehicle (and accessories such as a tow bar and trailer) is required.
- Overnight accommodation costs can be incurred. For some providers, there can be as much as six hours travelling involved to deliver services or programmes.
- Travel time for employees needs to be factored in to costings.

This highlights the lack of appropriate recognition for overheads and administrative costs in funding models. Distance and the challenges of geography are often not well understood by funders. A distance factor needs to be built into the cost of delivering services in rural areas. This should be a transparent (and negotiated) figure in outcome agreements.

Funding does not recognise the impact of rural isolation on contracted volumes

In addition to specific costs for undertaking travel, distance impacts on the volumes able to be serviced.

Home-based services with one-to-one client work is the clearest example of the travel/volumes problem. It may take a full day to carry out one visit with one family – see the case example on the next page.

If families are not available at times, this may impact on the volume requirements of key deliverables, which may in turn have negative financial implications for some providers. One provider gave the example of the Family Start programme where funding may have to be returned to government if contracted volumes are not met on a quarterly basis. This service covers many rural areas but no recognition is given for the specific challenges of rural service delivery.

Additional employee time is required to establish engagement with the service because the experience and observations are that isolated communities tend to be less welcoming of ‘outside’ services. This means additional consultation, partnership with local providers and commitment of time is necessary. It also requires highly skilled staff and works best when there is low turnover of staff.

Overall, and notwithstanding likely higher office location costs in some metropolitan areas, the cost structure is higher for rural services than in cities, based on the geographic spread of services and families, travel costs, lower volumes, recruitment challenges and professional development and supervision costs. A lack of buildings suitable for co-location of services means that rural towns often have multiple small organisations, each with their own buildings and rental costs.

The unit cost calculations that work for urban or metropolitan services do not match the costs for rural service delivery. This compounds the problems caused by persistent under-funding of community social services through the contributory funding model, the lack of recognition of overheads, and the lack of index-linked funding adjustments. A new funding model is required that supports, rather than undermines, the financial sustainability of rural service providers.

The realities of working in rural areas

The Pahiatua Community Services Trust provides services to the whole of the Tararua area. This includes the remote rural community of Pongaroa. The road between Pahiatua and Pongaroa is remote and can become dangerous in adverse weather conditions. In some places there is limited or no mobile phone coverage. It can take an hour of travel in each direction to home-visit families who live in Pongaroa. Workers will make the most of the time they are there by spending as much time as necessary with the client family, as well as popping in to the playgroup and primary school if possible. Once staff have returned to the office, there is just enough time to write their notes and prepare for the next day. Often two staff travel into this area to preserve safety. The result is one family visit completed by two staff on one day. This work is not reflected in a volumes contract for service.

A new funding model is needed that supports the sustainability of providers working in rural and remote communities

It is accepted that people living in small rural centres of population will not have access to a full range of specialised services in their own community. As noted above, Government has, to a large degree, withdrawn from these small population centres, other than through online or call centre services, but expects community providers to deliver services in rural areas. This puts the onus on community providers to meet the needs of their communities across a range of services and as a first point of contact. It is therefore the responsibility of Government agencies to support these community providers in relevant and practical ways so that they can deliver vital services.

The current funding models do not consider the sustainability of rural community services and often do not even deliver a level of funding that supports basic service delivery. Providers report having to fundraise for basic items. This problem goes beyond simply paying a more fair prices for contracted services and tweaking the weighting for travel (although this also needs to happen). A funding approach is needed that supports and sustains rural service providers and takes into account the real cost of running organisations that may be the only service available for areas of high deprivation.

Impact of under-funding

We at Riverton Community House have challenges around meeting travel costs. Over the last 7 years we have eroded our capital base to the tune of 80,000 dollars. This cannot be sustained too much longer.

We recommend

A new funding approach be developed to support the sustainability of rural service providers

This should include a funding model that replaces the contributory funding model, recognises overhead costs including travel, and recognises the impact of distance and isolation on service volumes.

SSPA rural members can provide expert and informed input to cost modelling that properly recognises rural travel costs in outcome agreements with funders.

All outcome agreement should be index-linked, including recognising the increasing costs associated with travel.

RECRUITING AND RETAINING QUALIFIED AND EXPERIENCED STAFF

Recruiting staff is becoming more challenging

Rural service providers report growing difficulties in recruiting staff, especially social workers.

The challenge of recruiting qualified staff is not a new one, nor is it limited to social services. Fewer people are willing to move to and settle in small rural centres than in the metropolitan areas. Contributing factors include distance and isolation, extent of travel in the job, fewer amenities, fewer job opportunities for other family members.

However, an already-challenging situation has been exacerbated by the pay gap that now exists for social workers in government and those in NGOs. The underlying problem here is the inadequacy of government funding which means providers are not able to respond to market wage movement.

Rural providers accept that they may not find a suitably qualified candidate from their local area which means that a potential employee may be travelling some distance to work. Compensation for this personal travel needs to be taken into account by rural organisations to ensure that they are an attractive employment option for skilled people.

These factors combine to make jobs for qualified and experienced professionals in rural NGOs less attractive in a competitive market.

Supporting staff is more difficult in rural areas – this impacts on retention rates

Providers report a range of challenges in supporting their staff, which has an impact on their ability to retain staff in a competitive environment, especially when taken in conjunction with remuneration difficulties.

Access to appropriate quality supervision is difficult for rural professionals. As well as limiting their professional development, this may have an impact on the quality of service provision.

Similarly, professional development opportunities are more limited and access to professional development is expensive and time consuming, due to travel time and cost and lack of reliable internet connectivity.

For some, especially those not from rural areas, the amount of travel required to deliver services becomes wearing. A range of services require regular or frequent travel between remote population centres including home-based services and education programmes.

Unique health and safety challenges

Rural service providers face unique challenges in providing reasonable health and safety environments for their staff.

Isolation and difficult travel are the key factors in relation to health and safety concerns:

- a. Weather conditions impact significantly. Weather report consultation is important before travel to remote areas is undertaken. Rural services face elevated risks of being caught in bush fires, or in winter snow.
- b. Mobile coverage is often patchy at best. This creates difficulties in keeping in contact and also reporting emergency situations.
- c. Road quality and the presence of heavy vehicles such as logging trucks and farm stock create additional hazards when driving
- d. The lack of permanent facilities in small centres means programmes such as education workshops need to be supported by bringing in and setting up resources each time. This means heavy lifting when loading resources for workshops – one provider said that 10 and 20 kg bins are required.
- e. Difficulties in being able to provide support and a realistic safety plan for staff members in concerning situations where the necessary response requirements are not available. Many rural areas do not have a police station, for example.
- f. Home visits may be to extremely remote places, which require detailed local knowledge to locate. Road and driveway access to rural homes may be problematic if these access routes are not well maintained.

These health and safety issues pose risks for employers and staff, and impose additional costs in putting in place mitigations, such as needing two staff for some activities, more frequent replacement of vehicles, higher quality technology to maintain contact when staff are out of the office.

We recommend

The Workforce Working Group should include rural perspectives to ensure solutions developed to manage recruitment and retention issues across the sector will be effective in meeting the specific challenges being experienced by providers delivering services in rural areas

Funders must support and progress the work on pay equity work to enable providers to offer fair pay relative to the market rates set by Oranga Tamariki.
