



Tending the Seedlings: Rural Hope end-of-programme review

Brendan Research
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Executive summary

In 2017, the Diocese of Salisbury was awarded £1.274million by the Strategic Development Fund (SDF) over 5 years to fund the Rural Hope Programme to develop rural ministry formation and to support mission and evangelism in the parish. Despite the ravages of COVID-19 and associated lockdowns, the decline in rural Worshipping Community size has been stopped, vocations to rural ministry discovered, and rural churches across the diocese given confidence to reach out in new ways.

Rural Hope consisted of four projects. Three were designed for rural ministry formation to increase the number of leaders with a vocation to rural ministry, to better equip them for rural contexts and thereby increase the number of strong applicants for vacancies. These were 1) the rural Ministerial Experience Scheme, 2) rural placements for curates, and 3) the Rural Training Pathway at Sarum College.

The fourth project focused on parishes and benefices, building additional strength and capacity for mission and evangelism, developing the untapped potential of lay leaders and a culture of collaborative ministry.

Due to the delay in recruiting personnel and the subsequent underutilisation of the first year, the programme was awarded a one-year extension. By the end of the programme (December 2022) there was an underspend of £338,537.

Across the programme, key **achievements** included:

- Resourcing and encouraging rural clergy through residentials, training and Rural Field Officers.
- 47 students (against a target of 24) studying on the Rural Training Pathway, the first and only contextualised training for rural ministry.
- 23 new initiatives catalogued with at least 10 reporting some new attenders.

Key **challenges** included:

- The enormous and unprecedented disruption of COVID-19 and no permission to be responsive to contextual challenges in lockdown.
- Working to meet unreachable targets, e.g. the Rural Training Pathway would not affect rural incumbent applicant numbers within 5 years.
- The difficulty in recruiting to the Ministerial Experience Scheme (MES).
- Achieving ownership of the programme at parish level where church members felt the programme did not address current concerns and burdens of rural parish ministry.
- The considerable difficulty in recruiting benefices to take part in collaborative team training. Only 92 individuals (against a target of 280) participated and the aim of building capacity for mission and numerical growth is evidenced in a limited number of contexts.

Moving forward:

- Rural MES will cease, and young vocations will be reimagined to develop the young people within the diocese, primarily through schools' work.
- Rural placements for curates will revert to being one option offered alongside others.
- The Rural Training Pathway will continue at Sarum College.
- The diocese will run the Flex course in 2024 as one of several training resources available.
- The work of the Rural Field Officers will be continued by rural mission enablers.

Learning from the Rural Hope experience includes the following:

- The diocese has gained experience and expertise in working with an SDF programme.
- While modest in its reach, it has created a momentum for rural mission to be built on.
- Realistic timeframes are needed for recruitment. Three key posts were not filled until two years into the five-year programme.
- Equipping for growth needs to be long-term not five-year.
- Other measures of growth are needed in a rural context to complement numerical targets.
- As a result of Rural Hope, the diocese will increase its emphasis on collaborative ministry and explore the potential of buildings for mission.

Recommendations

- **Due to national perceptions about rural ministry being undervalued, the word rural does need to be used explicitly to acknowledge differences in context and boost morale.** The priority on rural ministry through this programme has been a huge encouragement to stakeholders despite the limitations in what it has been able to achieve.
- **Communication needs to be savvy about who needs to know what and why.** Almost two-thirds of the people responding had very little awareness of the aims of the Rural Hope Programme. This is despite having received many diocesan communications about it.
- **Programmes need support at design stage** to ensure:
 1. Parishes and benefices have been consulted.
 2. Licensed lay leaders as well as clergy have been consulted and both local ministries are well-represented on the programme steering group membership.
 3. Reachable targets have been identified.
 4. It is agreed where the programme manager and the programme team 'sit' within diocesan central staffing structures.
 5. There are realistic timescales built in around the recruiting of staff.
 6. There is flexibility to change parts of the programme if it is clear early on that they are not working.
- **More detailed data is needed to accurately label new initiatives and track their ecclesial development.** While the number of new rural initiatives that were catalogued as part of Rural Hope was encouraging (especially in light of COVID-19), care is needed to prevent anything new being automatically labelled as a fresh expression of Church.
- **All aspects of training for rural ministry should address the realities of rural ministerial experience, not just ideal scenarios.** To prevent clergy leaving parish ministry or moving to other dioceses prematurely, greater support should be offered to those in rural first posts of responsibility to help them cope with managing rural multi-parish benefices.
- **Peer-to-peer support from local mission enablers (in this case Rural Field Officers) was preferred over the idea of support from 'top-down' experts.** However, any role of this kind can only work with willing local clergy and PCCs. Such roles should not be expected to resolve frustrations and barriers which need to be addressed at a higher level.
- **Resources from all Rural Hope training events should be made available online as part of the programme's legacy** to continue to resource and encourage mission in rural churches in this diocese and beyond.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Rural Hope Programme

In 2017, the Diocese of Salisbury were successful in their Strategic Development Fund (SDF) bid to invest in identifying, nurturing and training rural church leaders, working with local congregations, for mission and growth.

The programme consisted of four projects, three in rural ministry formation, and one focusing on parishes and benefices:

1. Rural Ministry Experience Scheme (MES) A scheme for young adults (18-30) to identify and encourage those with a vocation to rural ministry
2. Rural Placements Giving serving clergy experience of rural ministry
3. Rural Training Pathway Training and equipping people for the specific challenges of rural ministry (designed in conjunction with Sarum College)
4. Leading into Growth Supporting clergy and lay rural church leaders in groups and as individuals as they lead their churches into growth, through local topic-based training and mentoring, seed-corn funding for mission projects and support from new local mission posts.

1.2. The wider context

The theme of hope emerged in the 2015 diocesan vision *Renewing Hope: Pray, Serve, Grow* under Bishop Nicholas' instigation. This saw the emergence of prayer days, prayer booklets, Ministry for Mission and an increase in those exploring vocation to some form of authorised ministry.¹

The diocese's biggest challenge was sustaining numerical growth particularly in rural areas. Over 90% of its parishes – representing half of the population – are rural.

The Rural Hope programme sought to work for health and vibrancy of rural parochial ministry, recognising the importance of incarnational ministry. It named key challenges for clergy which included leading multiple communities, isolation, administration and lengthy travelling distances.

The first three projects of the programme were designed to increase the numbers of those with a vocation to rural ministry, to better equip them for rural contexts and thereby increase the number of strong applicants for vacancies.

The fourth project focused on building additional strength and capacity for mission and evangelism at parish level, developing the untapped potential of lay leaders and a culture of collaborative ministry.

In 2020 – part way through the funding period - the programme had to adjust to the COVID-19 pandemic, the greatest societal upheaval of this century. The programme continued throughout, despite the major effect on church activities at every level.

¹ *Renewing Hope through Rural Mission and Ministry Programme Plan 2017-2021*, September 2017, pp. 1 & 27.

1.3. This evaluation

At the close of 2022, this end-of-programme review gathered evidence with a critically appreciative perspective - looking to celebrate progress and signs of God at work, whilst also asking challenging questions.

It is tailored to the Terms of Reference set out by the Funding and Learning Team in consultation with the Rural Hope Programme Manager. See Appendix A for the methodological approach used in this review.

All research has its **limitations**. Though we are confident that we have used the most appropriate methods to achieve the aims of the evaluation, the following limitations must be acknowledged:

- Not all stakeholders were available for interview within the brief review timeframe, which coincided with the busy seasons of Advent and Christmas. Only one MES intern contributed to the survey.
- As the programme had finished at the end of 2022, some stakeholders were working in new posts and were unavailable for interview.
- The field visits were chosen to be illustrative of the impact of Rural Hope but were not intended to be a representative sample. During visits, we listened to the views of those leading the new initiatives, but we were not able to gather wider perspectives in local contexts.
- Capturing a truly accurate picture of the life of a diocese in every detail is impossible; with its multi-layered, complex and ever-changing dynamics, this review can only be a reflection of the perspectives of those we interviewed and surveyed.

1.4. About Brendan Research

Brendan Research specialises in statistical and geographical analysis for Christian organisations and denominations, bringing over 20 years' experience of conducting research and review work for faith communities.

Having undertaken previous research of this kind, we acknowledge our long-standing appreciation for pioneering and mission as a potential research bias alongside being female, white, middle-class and attending a liberal catholic Anglican parish on the east side of Sheffield (Claire) and serving as an Ordained Local Minister in the Church of Scotland (Fiona).

2. Programme objectives

'We want to continue investing in identifying, nurturing and training rural church leaders who, working with local congregations, will take hold of mission opportunities and spur their churches into growth ...to improve the profile and resilience of rural ministry so that our rural churches grow in confidence, numbers and impact...'

Programme Plan 2017 - 2021

The original objectives of the programme were summarised on p. 4 of the 2017 Programme Plan as aims and outcomes:

2.1. Programme aims

- Increase vocations to ordained ministry serving in rural areas.
- Prepare ordinands for the challenges and opportunities of rural ministry.
- Grow capacity and confidence in mission.
- Equip rural leaders so that the number of flourishing rural communities increases and rural churches grow.
- Develop a culture of collaboration, celebration and confidence within our rural churches.

2.2. Programme outcomes

- 8 interns on the MES programme discover a vocation to rural lay or ordained ministry.
- 50% of those on rural placements discover a vocation to rural ordained ministry.
- The average number of applicants for rural incumbencies increases by 50% (from two to three).
- 75% of rural clergy are part of the residential programme or part of a rural learning community.
- All rural parishes are linked into the programme and addressing matters of ministry and mission.
- Total worshipping community increases by 2% (500) above the projected 2019 baseline.
- The attendance at fresh expressions increases by 10% to 100.

2.3. Revised outcomes

Evaluating the programme using the lead and lag indicators outlined in the Programme Plan² proved problematic. Due to delays in staff recruitment, the Strategic Development Unit granted the programme a one year no-cost extension in 2018. This prompted a set of revisions to programme activities, outputs, outcomes and their targets although the modifications kept to the aims, outcomes and lead indicators in the original bid as much as possible.

In addition, a theory of change was constructed to illustrate how activities mapped onto outputs, outcomes and impact in the context of a 'journey of faith'. This is included in Appendix B of this report. It was also agreed that a degree of qualitative assessment (case studies, summary reports) would be included in annual reporting.

² *Renewing Hope through Rural Mission and Ministry Programme Plan 2017-2021*, September 2017, pp. 31-32.

3. Achievements and good news stories

'It's emphasised the rural nature of the diocese. I don't know where the rural church would be if we hadn't done this.'

The Rt Revd Karen Gorham, Bishop of Sherborne

3.1. Summary of project impact

Each of these diagrams shows the target (dark green) and actual (light green) values for the specified target. MES interns and Rural Placement targets were not met, while entrants to the Rural Training Pathway and the % of MES interns finding a vocation were over-target.

MES interns



Rural Placements



Entrants to Rural Training Pathway



MES vocations %



Rural Vocations



People on Thrive/Flex training



"My curacy and rural placement did expose me to rural ministry in varied contexts, as a result I did end up in a rural first incumbency which was not something I expected."

"Being able to get such hands-on experience so early on in my ordination journey (on the MES scheme), confirmed my calling to rural ministry."

Rural worshipping community size



Clergy attending training events



Benefices involved in Rural Hope



3.2. Examples of positive change achieved by the programme

The monthly virtual gathering called **The Village Pump**, facilitated by Rural Field Officer Richard Hancock acts as a rural 'hub' for clergy and laity across the diocese, with a few attending from other dioceses. Meeting on a Saturday at 9-10.30am, it operates as a space for 35-50 participants to receive teaching and share ideas to engage with their local communities more effectively. Beginning in May 2021, topics of discussion have included outdoor worship, resources for rural festivals such as Rogation Sunday, benefice administration, getting Wi-Fi into church and advice on completing Mission Action Plans. After participating on Zoom, one church warden fed back how much they appreciated the enthusiasm of the gathering, adding *'We need more positive thinking post Covid, and I did like [the] idea of holding the Harvest Festival with the local church school on a Friday rather than Sunday.'*

Chuppa at St Mary's Wingfield began with a discussion between Rural Field Officer Rhona Floate and church members about how the church could help the community rather than the community helping the church. The 2019/20 Rural Hope Annual Report described the process of bringing an idea to life. *'A small self-selecting group of lay people ... conceived the plan for Chuppa, ... to meet the needs of parents meeting after the school drop-off.'* 10-25 attend each monthly gathering in the church for a cuppa and a chat. The narrative among PCC and church members changed from *'There's no way we can do x ...'* to *'Maybe we can find a way.'* Post lockdown, the previously failing family service has been relaunched as Chuppa Sunday drawing 15-20 new worshippers, including up to 4 teenagers, alongside 15 existing worshippers.

The lay leaders of **Muddy Church** at St John's Pewsey took part in Thrive at the encouragement of their Rural Field Officer. Following a successful holiday club, the team were keen to develop something regular for families, building on their shared passion for the outdoors. Thrive gave them the impetus to begin and now 15-30 people across a wide range of ages take part in what is advertised as 'a walk and a wonder'. As their confidence has grown, they have taken Muddy Church website resources and adapted them for their own context. An estimated 30% of those attending wouldn't otherwise attend church. Others in the diocese have contacted them for resources, having heard them present at a Rural Day.

The monthly Sunday morning **Breakfast Church** at St Michaels and All Angels Figcheldean in the Avon River Team is a very good example of a collaborative approach to mission. With the support of her incumbent, Lay Worship Leader Clare Tunnicliffe involves as many people as possible in facilitating this informal, interactive service. Begun in 2021, it draws 30-35 people on average (with a core of 50) from mostly older residents, typical of the age profile of those living in the village. Although the idea for this initiative was not a direct result of Thrive participation, Rural Field Officer Rhona Floate encouraged Clare to share her team's new-found confidence through what they've begun at the Ramsbury Rural Day. Clare commented *'don't underestimate how much people like me want to give.'*

3.3. Details of actuals against targets

Targets and actuals³ for Rural Ministry Formation

	2016 Base	Total Target (recast in 2020)	Total Actual	Targets included in Rural Hope bid (2017)
Rural MES				
Numbers entering the scheme	0	15	5	15 rural MES interns from 2017 to 2022
Numbers going on to attend a BAP or lay discernment process	0	8 (53%)	3 (60%)	8 interns discover a vocation to rural lay or ordained ministry
Rural placements				
Number of rural placements	0	75	58	Up to 15 placements per annum
Those entering rural ministry	0	31 (41%)	23 (40%)	50% discover a vocation to rural ordained ministry (1 year delay)
Rural Training Pathway				
Number entering training	0	26	47	4 to 8 ordinands p.a. on rural pathway from Sept. 2017

Rural Ministerial Experience Scheme (MES):

- MES participating numbers were under target due to recruitment issues made more difficult with the terminal ill-health of the initial coordinator.
- The target of ‘8 discovering a vocation to rural ministry’ was not tracked beyond departure from the scheme. Anecdotally, 3 are pursuing rural ministry – all but 1 outside Salisbury diocese.
- The numbers ‘discovering a vocation to rural ministry’ came in under target (3 compared with 8), but the percentage of MES interns going forward was above target (60% compared with 53%).

Rural Placements:

- Placement participant numbers fell below target due to an overestimation of the number of curates per year. Though it was mandatory for curates, where there were less than 15 in a given year, it was impossible to meet the target.
- 3 of 58 were Cuddesdon ordinands in 2019. Apart from these, it proved difficult to recruit from other dioceses. Stakeholders speculated that a) the scheme was not suitable for people at that stage of development, b) the timing of placements may not have matched that of other theological education institutions (TEIs), c) TEIs often have their own placements with supervisors they know.
- The number of curates who took up a post of first responsibility in rural ministry (in either rural or part rural benefices) having done a Rural Hope placement is 23. Of the 23, 12 were fully stipended, 3 half-time stipended and 8 were self-supporting ministers (SSM). There are a further 18 who are still in curacy and have not yet moved on but who have done Rural Hope placements.
- Interviewees commented that placements served some curates by discovering rural was *not* what they were called to - saving both them and the diocese much heartache further down the line.

Rural Training Pathway:

- Participant numbers on the Rural Training Pathway are above target due to widening training to 6 LLMs from Salisbury and 11 Lay Readers from Bath and Wells, Exeter and Bristol dioceses. The September 2022 intake is not included as they have yet to begin the pathway.
- The outcome of increasing the average number of applicants for rural vacancies is too early to track for incumbency vacancies.
- Of all who began training, 2 were not ordained or licensed after completing the pathway and one left because of a change in training parishes, moving into an urban context.

³ Actuals are based on data in annual reports plus data supplied by the Rural Hope team and diocesan staff.

Targets and actuals for Leading into Growth

	2016 Base	Total Target (recast in 2020)	Total Actual	Targets included in Rural Hope bid (2017)
Number of rural fresh expressions	60	+ 6	+23	Number of rural fresh expressions has increased by 5% to 63 by early 2020 and by 10% to 66 by 2022
Numbers attending rural fresh expressions	2,280 ⁴	+228	324	Attendance at rural fresh expressions has increased by 10% by 2022
No. people involved in training	0	280	92	70 people p.a. involved in training e.g. Thrive learning communities
No. of rural clergy attending rural residential/days/in Thrive and Flex learning communities	0	142	163	75% of rural clergy involved by 2022
No. of rural parishes actively involved in RH	0	395 parishes in 101 benefices	82 benefices, of 101 rural benefices	100% of rural parishes involved by 2022

- Tracking data on overall fresh expression/new worshipping community numbers and attendance was not properly thought through at bid stage. The diocese does not hold up-to-date records on overall fresh expression numbers or attendance. The revised outcomes focused on rural fresh expressions only.
- The number of rural fresh expressions (and their attendance) may be greater. These figures are based on those the Rural Field Officers were aware of. We note that 2021 Statistics for Mission returns show a minimum of 305 each week (uWa and uSa, with attendance at 3 locations recorded as unknown). However, these reported figures come with a caveat that the data supplied suggests not all are fresh expressions of church; the list includes two home groups, a prayer group and a bible study group. Furthermore, data on whether these or other initiatives are attracting new attenders is incomplete.
- The numbers involved in training is under target due to unrealistic targets over recruitment and COVID-19.
- The number of rural clergy attending training or learning communities is calculated from individuals attending rural residentials, rural days, webinars, Rural Symposium, the Village Pump and those involved in Thrive and Flex. A small number of the 163 clergy were classified as urban, attending because a) they were in a team that although is classified as urban, has some rural parishes within it or b) the subject matter of the webinars although they were specifically targeted towards rural churches, were a good resource for clergy in general. This total does not include clergy from other dioceses.
- Numbers actively involved in Rural Hope are reported by benefices rather than parishes. There are 138 benefices in total, of which 101 are rural/part rural. 82 rural/part rural benefices were 'actively involved' defined as:
 - Any benefice taking part in Thrive/Flex (see below for definition).
 - RFO gave them some degree of mission support
 - Where someone from the benefice regularly attends the Village Pump.
 - A curate or MES student was sent on placement within the benefice.
 - Are a sending benefice for a student on the Rural Training Pathway.
 - Clergy and/or laity participated in rural residentials, rural days and webinars.
An additional 8 benefices of purely urban parishes (using the DEFRA definition) were actively involved in webinar participation and sending a student on the Rural Training Pathway.

⁴ This figure was given in the bid document. However, it is based on the assumption that rural fresh expressions have an average of 38 people as their "usual weekly attendance", which we cannot back up.

What are Thrive and Flex?

Thrive is a course developed by CPAS working with Lead Academy and the Arthur Rank Centre. Its strapline is 'multi-parish benefices that work'. The course is for lay leaders, influential lay members and clergy. Participants commit to four two-day non-residential gatherings over two years plus a final day for review and commissioning.

Flex is a shorter course adapted by CPAS from Thrive material. Like Thrive, training aims to develop collaborative leadership in rural benefices. Flex gathers clergy and lay teams for four Saturday sessions over the course of one year.

Targets and actuals for Lead and Lag indicators

	2016 Base	Total Target (recast in 2020)	Total Actual	Targets included in Rural Hope bid (2017)
Lead indicators				
No. of individuals on Germinate programme	0	8	2	
No. of people involved in missional hubs/action learning communities	0	440	345 attendances	Joint target (440 rural leaders involved in Leading into Growth by 2022)
Nos. attending mission focused training events	0		221 attendances at 3 rural days 368 attendances across 12 rural webinars 76 attenders at rural symposium	
Lag indicators				
Worshipping community figures (rural only)	14,308	12,722	14,260 in 2021	Increase total rural Worshipping Community by 2% over 2020 baseline by 2022
Av. number of applicants per ministerial post in rural benefices	2	3	Estimation of 1 in Ramsbury episcopal area 10 in Sherborne episcopal area in all benefices (not just rural)	Increase av. no. of applicants for rural vacancies by 50% (from 2 to 3) by 2022

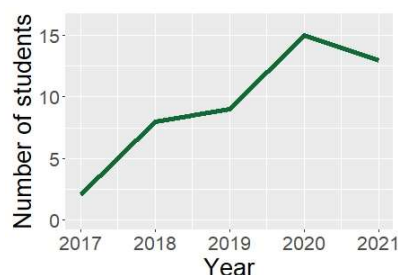
Lead and lag indicators:

- Geminate, the course for individual leaders used initially by the Programme, participant numbers are under target as the course was deferred due to COVID-19 lockdown and the decision taken not to continue.
- The number of people involved in missional hubs/action learning communities includes rural attenders at CMD events, the chaplaincy hub and the CMS lay pioneer course.
- The 12,722 target for rural worshipping community figures was 'recast' in 2020, recognising that it would take time to reverse the decline and increase worshipping community numbers. The average decline in the years 2015-2017 was 4.35%. This figure was applied by the diocese to the 2017 rural worshipping community figures to arrive at the 2020 baseline.
- Worshipping community figures (rural only) are calculated from 2021 Statistics for Mission with urban parishes (according to DEFRA) removed. Data for Channel Islands parishes/benefices have also been removed.
- Estimation of average number of applicants per ministerial post in the two episcopal areas of the diocese are affected by many factors including COVID-19 and desirability of living in Dorset rather than Wiltshire. It is too early for recruitment to be affected by the Rural Training Pathway.

3.4. Anticipated long-term programme impact

In considering programme aims, under **an increase in vocations** to ministry serving in rural areas:

- The existence of a programme focused purely on rural ministry has raised hopes that the National Church is committed to see vocations increase and flourish in the rural context.
- The number of participants on the Rural Pathway has increased although this growth will need to be tracked long-term to track an increase in numbers called to serve as rural incumbents.



Year of intake	Students
2017	2
2018	8
2019	9
2020	15
2021	13

Under **preparing ordinands** for the challenges and opportunities of rural ministry:

- Dr Jill Hopkinson's 2022 report on research with course participants confirmed that they were better prepared for rural ministry and mission, prioritising '*learning about community dynamics and relationships*' in their curacies as they had been taught.⁵

Under **growing capacity and confidence in mission**:

- The existence of a programme focused purely on rural areas has offered a sense of possibility in the context of what often feels to be inevitable decline. '*Rural Hope's greatest legacy is the diocesan-wide positive change in attitude towards mission and rural mission in particular.*'⁶

Under **equipping rural leaders** so that the number of flourishing rural communities increases and rural churches grow:

- Survey work generated 7 positive responses from leaders of new initiatives indicating confidence in taking their initiatives forward long-term.
- The Rural Training Pathway will continue to train and equip LLMs and lay leaders in other dioceses for rural ministry.

Under **developing a culture of collaboration, celebration and confidence within our rural churches**

- Due to the focus on relational teamwork, Thrive and Flex have enabled pockets of people to look at new ways to approach ministry increasing capacity and confidence.
- The rural residentials and rural days encouraged a culture of collaboration that can be built on.
- The programme gave rural clergy greater confidence in adapting to ministry during lockdown.

However, these encouragements have to be held in tension with the survey responses in Appendix C which indicated that for people throughout the diocese, on the 'rural' mailing list:

- Almost two-thirds of the people responding had very little awareness of the aims of the Rural Hope Programme. This is despite having received many diocesan communications about it.
- The most common challenges in rural ministry were felt to be a lack of stipendiary clergy, ageing congregations, and an uncertain financial future.
- Survey respondents who were aware of what Rural Hope was set up to do were positive about its ability to assist, and its lasting impact. Those who were not aware were very negative.

There is a level of disconnect, through distrust or busyness, between local churches and the diocese.

⁵ Rural Pathway Update Report April 2022, p. 5.

⁶ 2021/22 Annual Report, p. 14.

3.5. Alignment with the National Church's Vision and Strategy

Rural Hope was designed before the National Church's Vision and Strategy emerged.⁷ However, in retrospect, Rural Hope outcomes might be said to align with national outcomes in the following ways:

Under **to become a church of missionary disciples**, Rural Hope:

- Through the Rural Training Pathway, trained 17 lay people (between 2017 and 2021) as leaders for the rural context in this diocese and beyond '*who come from rural multi-parish benefices and go back to rural multi-parish benefices*'.

Under being a church **where mixed ecology is the norm**, Rural Hope:

- Encouraged a culture where mixed ecology is becoming more accepted (although there is further to unpack in what is meant by the term).

Under **to be a church that is younger**, Rural Hope:

- Facilitated a year's ministerial experience for 5 young adults.
- Initiated, supported and/or catalogued 12 new initiatives working specifically with families.
- Through St Aldhelm's grant funding, the Dorset RFO purchased Prayer Space Kits for schools in partnership with the National Prayer Space in Schools team. Teams from local churches were trained to work with their local schools in using the Prayer Space Kit and the opportunities flowing from it.

Under **a parish system revitalised for mission**, Rural Hope:

- Trained 92 individuals (clergy and lay) in collaborative leadership for rural mission through Thrive and Flex.
- Through the Rural Training Pathway, trained 30 ordinands to reach and serve rural communities more effectively.
- Provided residentials for clergy described as '*re-energising*' in the 2019 evaluation.
- Provided rural days, symposium event, webinars, networking gatherings and Rural Field Officers to encourage mission at parish level.
- Saw team members working directly for the programme develop a greater sense of vision for mission in the rural context and gain experience in enabling others.

Under **creating ten thousand new Christian communities**, Rural Hope:

- Initiated, supported and/or catalogued 23 new initiatives across a range of church traditions.
- Supported 11 parishes as Pathway Projects requiring '*support with an earlier step in the process*'⁸ in preparation for outreach that may in time generate new initiatives.

Under **local churches becoming communities and hubs for initial and ongoing formation**, Rural Hope:

- Facilitated local churches to host 58 rural placements plus 5 MES interns to support initial and ongoing vocation discernment.
- Tracked 16 benefices sending students on the Rural Training Pathway.

⁷ <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/emerging-church-england/vision-and-strategy> [accessed November 29th 2022]

⁸ 2018/19 Annual Report p. 9.

4. Programme design

Regarding mission theory, the programme design assumed that:

- ‘... high quality, specific and locally accessible training and development should be provided through dioceses for clergy and lay people in multi-church groups to support discipleship, mission, the ministry of lay people, work with schools, children and young people, worship and leadership ...’
- ‘... meaningful mission and growth are possible in rural multi-church groups, where time and space is created for it to take place and where the ministry of lay people is enabled and equipped ...’⁹

The rural ministry formation projects of the programme were designed to identify, enthuse and equip rural leaders of the future by the following interventions:

- Extending an existing Church of England Ministerial Experience Scheme in an urban area of the diocese to provide rural placements for young adults to explore vocation to rural ministry.
- Facilitating 15 rural placements per year for curates as mandatory where previously only 1 or 2 of the 10-15 summer placements available were rural.
- Creating a Rural Training Pathway, approved by Ministry Division, developed in partnership with Sarum College to offer contextualised training for rural ministry.

The parish-level project sought to resource those currently ministering in rural contexts in the areas of evangelism and mission where benefices/parishes needed additional strength and capacity.

Working alongside existing diocesan resource (CMD, Ministry for Mission), the following elements were designed to bring about a cultural shift in growth at parish level:

- Leadership training for individuals through Germinate
- Leadership training for teams through courses such as Thrive
- Appointing Rural Field Officers to support and encourage mission at parish level
- Extending the existing Energising Local Ministry scheme to rural parishes
- Encouraging participation in events, hubs and learning communities
- Addressing the burden of administration on rural benefices and deaneries

Changes to the design:

- Due to ‘the delay in recruiting to Rural Hope posts which had a knock-on effect’ on targets, the programme was granted a one-year funding extension to finish at the end of 2022.
- The first three projects were originally designed with ordained leadership in mind. Over the course of the programme, this has widened to encourage lay vocations also.
- Originally, the fourth project was called ‘Leading into Growth’ but this title did not catch on.
- Participation in Germinate was dropped part-way through due to COVID-19 disruption.
- The programme team ‘identified a number of shortcomings’ in the Thrive course and developed ‘a revised course, Flex, to address these issues.’¹⁰
- Rural residentials for clergy evolved into rural days for clergy and laity, recognising the overall programme aim of encouraging collaborative ministry across clergy and lay teams.

⁹ Both quotes are from *Renewing Hope through Rural Mission and Ministry Programme Plan 2017-2021*, September 2017, p. 26, quoting *Released for Mission, Growing the Rural Church*, 2015.

¹⁰ 2020/21 Annual Report p. 1.

What worked?

As an integrated programme, working with the grain of the parish system, Rural Hope sought to enable transformation without draining energy away into a brand-new tier of structures. It also opted for light-touch branding. This was helpful given the diocesan vision to support incarnational ministry through local parishes but also a wise approach given that resources were so thin.

Rather than parachuting in an expert, Rural Field Officers were appreciated for being on an equal footing to parish clergy, most having first-hand experience of ministering in multiple parishes and being able to point to appropriate mission resources. Training events offered much-needed support practically and pastorally.

The number of rural new worshipping communities is encouraging but there is limited data to offer comment on to what extent they are fresh expressions of Church.¹¹ Only 10 explicitly record the attendance of newcomers. In addition, some stakeholders recommended caution in concluding these new initiatives are all a *direct* result of Rural Hope interventions. This was confirmed in interviews with leaders on two field visits who would have started their initiatives anyway but were grateful for the additional support and encouragement received through Thrive or their RFO. The collection of more detailed data is recommended here.

While the Rural Training Pathway has been positive, stakeholders commented that training tends to assume the best possible rural scenario, rather than what is realistic. Curates indicated placements were more useful for understanding the pressures of multi-parish benefices than being inspired by mission opportunities. More worryingly, of those who took up a first post of responsibility in a rural or part-rural context following a Rural Hope placement, some have since left these posts prematurely.

Survey responses indicate a groundswell of longing for a traditional kind of one-clergy-one-church ministry evidenced further in the kind of clergy often advertised for through parish profiles. There is work to do with benefices in vacancy to help them understand they should not expect to recruit this kind of incumbent.

What didn't work?

Stakeholders commented that the design felt right from '*what we could see at the time*' but that the outcomes were wrong – in what was being measured and in the unreachable targets set. A five-year programme is too short to measure success by the number of applicants to rural incumbencies.

All agreed the MES scheme was not cost-effective and proved impossible to scale up. Over difficulties in recruiting teams to take part in Thrive, it was noted '*given the high average ages involved, not everyone trying to keep a rural church going has the time or energy to embark upon a demanding course, however much they may agree with its aims.*'¹²

The limitations of an integrated programme became evident through survey work. Almost two-thirds of the people responding had very little awareness of the aims of the Rural Hope Programme despite the considerable work that went into the communications plan. This has a potentially negative effect where some fear that strategic decisions – involving the allocation of finances – are made by those 'at the centre' with little consideration of – or connection to – the realities and pressures of local church life.

¹¹ See Church Army's Research Unit (2016) *The Day of Small Things: An analysis of fresh expressions of Church in 21 dioceses of the Church of England* p. 18 for a definition of an Anglican fresh expression of Church.

¹² 2021/22 Annual Report p. 12.

5. Implementation

5.1. Staffing

Post	Name	Start and end dates
Rural Ministry Tutor p/t	Dr Jill Hopkinson, then Jo Neary	September 2018 – April 2022 May 2022 – February 2023
Rural Field Officer: Dorset p/t	Revd Canon Richard Hancock	October 2018 – December 2022
Rural Field Officer: Sarum p/t	Claire Horton	January 2019 – April 2022
Rural Field Officer: Sherborne p/t	Alice Farnhill, then Revd Margaret Pruess-Higham	January 2019 - 2020 2020 – December 2022
Rural Field Officer: Wilts p/t	Revd Rhona Floate	March 2019 – December 2022
Ministry for Mission Resource Officer f/t (50% funded by Rural Hope)	Steve Inglis	October 2018 - continuing
Energising Local Ministry p/t	Revd Janet Smith	June 2018 – December 2022
Rural Ministry Development Officer p/t	Clare Phillips	June 2018 – February 2023
Programme Manager p/t	Sarah Keen	November 2017 – February 2023

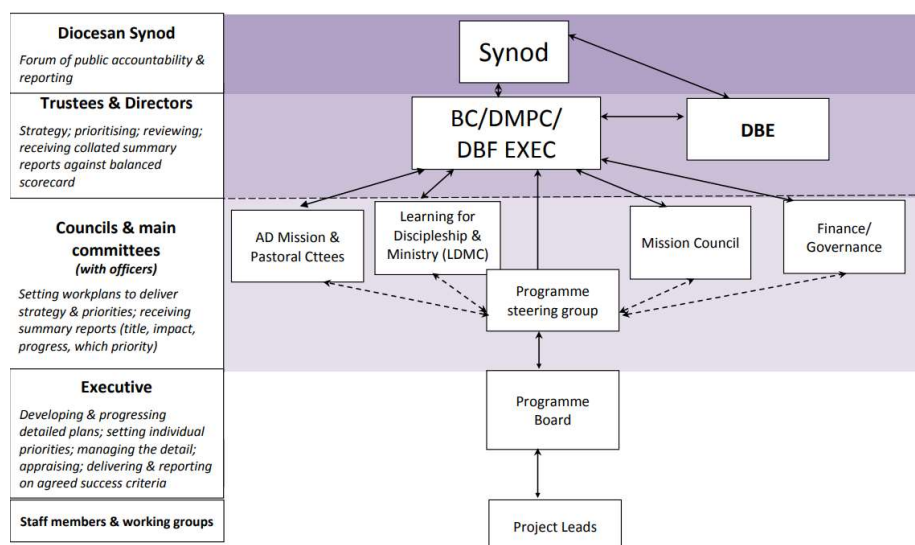
The Rural Hope team worked in partnership with diocesan staff including the Director of Mission and Ministry, the Director of Ordinands, the Vocations Coordinator, the IME/CMD Coordinator and the Diocesan Board of Education. Each Rural Field Officer was line-managed by their archdeacon.

In practice:

- Across the entire programme, COVID-19 proved a huge challenge, especially regarding the experiential elements.
- The lengthy time taken to recruit to posts led to the delay in training targets being met and the first year of the programme not being fully utilised.
- Recognising the original Rural Ministry Coordinator job role required an unrealistic combination of skills in one person, it was divided in 2018. A part-time Rural Ministry Development Officer role was created to coordinate placements and facilitate parish support components. A separate part-time Rural Ministry Tutor was created and appointed to the staff of Sarum College.
- Three posts were extended to support the end-of-programme review.

5.2. Governance

Section 5 of the Programme Plan outlined the following governance structure:



In practice:

- The Steering Group met every two months with good attendance, utilising Zoom and scheduling meetings around Bishop's Council. Twice a year the Rural Hope team joined for a working lunch.
- As early as the 2017/18 Annual Report, *'the need for good consultation and communication at local level'* was noted. Despite the efforts through all the usual diocesan communication channels plus presentations at diocesan, archdeaconry and deanery gatherings, survey results indicate a gap.
- After two years, the Steering Group was felt to be doing the work of both Steering Group and Programme Board so the Programme Board was *'subsumed into the Diocesan Management Group'*.¹³ While this simplified governance to a degree, sometimes this led to confusion over issues such as sign-off procedures.
- At times, the Rural Hope team operated 'like an island' within central staffing structures with both the RH team and those outside it wishing there had been more integration.
- There was no precedent for the role of Programme Manager in the diocese. How senior or junior this role was understood to be within the diocese varied.
- Matrix management¹⁴ for RFOs reporting to archdeacons was felt to be a mixed experience. The local focus was good but RFOs worked differently according to their archdeacon's priorities.

¹³ 2018/19 Annual Report p. 10.

¹⁴ The Rural Field Officers were accountable to the Rural Hope team and Steering Group but line managed by their local archdeacon.

5.3. Programme budget

This is the Rural Hope budget projected to 31 December 2022 based on 31 October 2022 actual figures and including costs of staff extensions:

	Figures Actual Start to 31.10.2022 £	Projected Spend Nov -December 2022	Total Projected spend to December 2022	Total Budget £	Unspent Budget Vs Projected spend to December 2022 £
Staff costs					
Programme manager x 1 : 60% FTE	148,504	8,393	156,897	147,437	-9,460
Rural ministry tutor x 1 : 50% FTE from September 2018	97,583	5,023	102,606	108,395	5,789
Rural ministry development officer x 1 : 50% FTE from June 2018	71,529	5,043	76,572	76,039	-533
ELM Coordinator x 1 : 40% FTE from July 2018	48,430	1,928	50,358	51,532	1,173
M4M officer x 1 : 50% FTE from October 2018	83,043	3,792	86,835	82,582	-4,253
Field officers x 4 : 50% FTE	274,850	7,047	281,897	315,442	33,545
Total new staff costs	723,939	31,226	755,165	781,427	26,262
Other Costs					
Rural MES	18,934	-	18,934	60,666	41,732
Curate rural placements	7,716	-	7,716	20,488	12,771
Leading into Growth					
Thrive Learning Communities	20,054	1,898	21,953	134,328	112,375
Residential - Renewing hope in the Countryside	22,261	-	22,261	88,467	66,205
Germinate leadership programme	5,434	-	5,434	14,885	9,451
Flex programme	3,905	4,027	7,932	-	-7,932
Rural Symposium	4,105	11,000	15,105	-	-15,105
Rural Ministry Day	6,058	16,000	22,058	44,935	22,878
Leading your Church into growth (LyCIG)	-	-	-	38,354	38,354
Set up costs in employment of new staff including recruitment	10,427	-	10,427	13,091	2,664
Staff expenses	27,318	3,909	31,227	49,198	17,971
Volunteer costs	-	-	-	3,491	3,491
Annual Rural Context weekend (trainee LLMs to attend)	2,520	2,500	5,020	7,503	2,483
Communications	1,212	500	1,712	4,714	3,001
Governance	553	200	753	2,426	1,673
Evaluation	-	10,000	10,000	10,000	0
Contingency (balancing figure)	-	-	-	262	262
Total other costs	130,497	50,035	180,531	492,807	312,276
Total costs	854,436	81,261	935,697	1,274,234	338,537

There is an underspend of £338,537, 26% of the original budget. While there may have been optimistic spend projections in the original bid, this must be seen in the context of lockdowns to prevent the spread of COVID-19. These greatly restricted in-person events and placements that had been costed. Moving to online meetings and activities saved a great deal of money, and also allowed events to take place at all during the period of lockdown.

Almost a third of the underspend (£112,375) was in the budget for the Thrive Learning Communities, the reasons for this are described elsewhere.

The lockdowns introduced an unprecedented and unforeseeable situation, with novel demands on clergy and dioceses. It is unfortunate that the diocese was not permitted to re-direct budgets for in-person events to other resources supporting parish mission at this difficult time.

6. Sustainability

Referring to the original expectations regarding financial sustainability¹⁵, it is difficult to see how the programme will be resourced from 2023 onwards with the following exceptions:

- Through the Rural Hope team, Thrive/Flex participants and leaders of new worshipping communities, the diocese has gained experienced and energised individuals who are able to develop others. Flex has been designed to contain a ‘train the trainers’ element. The Mission Oversight Groups which have been running concurrently with the programme will continue.
- It is too early to tell if Rural Hope will generate more contributions to Fairer Share although some interviewees reasoned that Rural Hope has helped to create an environment for the current Diocesan Giving Advisor to introduce ‘tap and pay’ points and offer general advice on giving as part of ongoing discussions around reducing benefice administration. Other interviewees identified the need to be more transparent with new attenders about how churches are funded, recognising that often those new to church (as well as some long-time members) do not know.
- Other dioceses will be encouraged to send individuals onto the Rural Training Pathway to extend funding for Sarum College to continue funding the teaching element. Whether Sarum College is expected to fund the Pathway alone remains unclear, raising the question – to what extent is it meaningful to call it a partnership if financing/resourcing is not a shared endeavour?

Rural Hope activities and outcomes to be continued

The Ministry Experience Scheme will be reimagined to focus on young people growing up *within* the diocese, with the Vocations Coordinator working closely with the Diocesan Board of Education to build on existing work in schools and the discipleship year that has developed in Poole.

Rural placements will revert to being one type of placement that curates can opt to do. Rural placements will be strongly encouraged but alongside other placements options such as school or chaplaincy. While successful for many, a few found them to be a nuisance. In hindsight, mandatory placements were felt to go ‘against the grain of thinking’ in the diocese that curates should be treated as adults with the right to manage their own choices in training - as preparation for managing their own lives in ministry.

The Rural Training Pathway will be maintained beyond the funding period and Sarum College are exploring the possibility of expanding rural training through weekend/short courses.

For ongoing support at parish level, the diocese will run Flex as one of several training resources available in 2024. The Rural Field Officers *‘are to be replaced with a larger group of local volunteer rural mission enablers, both ordained and lay’*¹⁶ and the Village Pump will continue. More support will be available for leaders of new worshipping communities and Thrive/Flex graduates in different areas of the diocese e.g. Action Learning Sets in the Sarum Archdeaconry, the pioneering network in Dorset, coaching by the Lay Ministry Development Officer.

Rural days and rural residentials will continue in some form to offer opportunities for clergy to gather their lay teams for resourcing and training. Resources from all Rural Hope events should be gathered and made available online as part of the programme’s legacy although there appears to be some confusion over who actions this now the programme has drawn to a close.

¹⁵ *Renewing Hope through Rural Mission and Ministry Programme Plan 2017-2021*, September 2017, p. 22.

¹⁶ 2021/22 Annual Report p. 1.

7. Learning

7.1. Learning around outcomes

'My most memorable moment was seeing the smiles and hearing the laughter as members of my Thrive group "got" what the Merlin Exercise was trying to teach them, and they started trying to tell their own story differently.'

Clergy participant on Thrive training

Ministerial Experience Scheme

- The outcomes identified for MES led to assumptions that it was a fast-track pathway to ordination. Pastorally, this was deeply unhelpful should MES interns have been turned down for ministry.
- Placing interns on their own in some rural contexts meant they had no one living near of a similar age. They could have been lived in towns and worked in rural villages nearby to gain experience.
- This experience has highlighted the need for the diocese to focus on developing the vocations of young people *within* Salisbury diocese.
- One stakeholder commented that young vocations are infectious where church attenders hear young people talk about vocation – offering attenders a chance to reflect on their own calling.

Rural Placements

- When curates have families and one car, placements are hard to do well if curates cannot live away from home and travelling times are lengthy. It was additionally difficult for self-supporting curates in having to fit placements round work commitments.
- Finding the best time for a placement is always a challenge for both curate and parish but the short-term nature of these placements meant it was not too much to ask of either.
- The energy and positivity of the host incumbent is critical for good placements.
- There is a need for prior planning including the agreeing of clear learning objectives between curates and their training supervisors at the outset.
- Finding placements in parishes with enough mission happening for a curate to learn from is more challenging in rural areas.
- Further ministerial support is needed after curacy. Crockfords indicates that 5 out of the 12 curates who did placements and went on to take up a rural or part-rural full-time stipendiary first post of responsibility left their posts prematurely and have since moved out of the diocese.

Rural Training Pathway

- Sarum College commented that no one has asked them to track whether the pathway will lead to more rural incumbents long-term but agree this is an opportunity for ongoing research.
- *'Does anyone up north know it exists?'* Proactive advertising is needed to attract attention more widely. Even within the diocese, is it appreciated? One interviewee commented that only after 18 months did their church ask them for advice from their learning on the Rural Training Pathway.
- Sarum College is committed to equity in training clergy and laity, stipendiary and non-stipendiary, full-time and part-time. Recognising that some categories of those training travel some distance and/or need to fit training around work, feedback on student experience needs close monitoring.
- A few stakeholders queried why the Rural Training Pathway is 'opt in'. If 90% of the diocese's parishes are rural, why is this not standard or 'opt out'?

Collaborative team training (Thrive and Flex)

- Reasons for lack of uptake for Thrive included:
 - It required people to commit to a Friday as well as a Saturday.
 - Thrive didn't release enough detail to advertise what the course entailed.
 - The word 'course' was off-putting.
 - Where some clergy are a few years from retiring, they want a smooth ending and no radical change 'at the last minute'.
- As with any diocese, no one approach is likely to suit all contexts. In Salisbury diocese, the biggest distinction is split across the Dorset and Wiltshire county line. Where it proved very difficult to attract interest for Thrive from the Dorset side of the diocese, stakeholders offered their theories as to why, which included:
 - The Wiltshire and Sarum archdeaconries are nearer the M4 with connections to Bristol and Bath for work, attracting those in a stage of life more used to engaging in an experience like Thrive.
 - In Dorset, more parishes have been willing to 'grasp the nettle' of pastoral reorganisation, resulting in upheaval that needs time to settle before taking part in something like Thrive.
 - With its greater demographic extremes, there might have been a feeling that Dorset was already '*doing a lot*' through its initiatives in other areas that its deep rural churches could tap into.

7.2. Learning from what worked and did not work

Returning to the three priorities and six bold outcomes of the National Church's Vision and Strategy, learning from Rural Hope includes the following points.

To be a church of missionary disciples:

- Educating clergy to work as a team with their laity takes time. In the short-term, the idea can seem like more work to busy clergy; the long-term benefits must be emphasised.
- There is always more to do in equipping church attenders to talk about their faith in Sunday to Saturday conversations. A few interviewees identified a need for space to talk together about doubts as well as faith. The downside of some faith nurture courses is they are presented as if '*we have all the answers*', leaving no space for honest discussion.
- In some parishes, the language of 'mission', 'missional', 'missionary disciples' and 'discipleship' is not understood. Even when it is explained, it is met with a degree of suspicion or resistance. The same applies to 'hubs' and 'missional communities'.

To be a church where mixed ecology is the norm, through creating ten thousand new Christian communities:

- There is an openness to explore spirituality in nature evidenced in the number of muddy church, forest church and walking church initiatives that have emerged, accompanied by a more general acceptance that outdoor expressions of church complement - rather than compete with - indoor services.
- Experiencing a new Christian community is the most effective way of learning about them.

- Maintaining records on new initiatives in a diocese takes time and effort – as does making pastoral assessment of whether an initiative is a fresh expression of Church, a Pathway Project, renewal for existing churchgoers or a social action project. Relational contact through visits and telephone calls (as opposed to emails or surveys) are more likely to generate the data needed to support Statistics for Mission data.

To be a church that is younger and more diverse:

- In some parishes, there are no children living in the community.
- The diocese may have a modest number of children in church but they have lots of church schools. One stakeholder raised the question: *'Why would children come to church if they've had worship every day of the week?'*
- Young people themselves must be involved in deciding what is needed for them. Young people are not there just to reassure congregations they have young people. Just as they are encouraged to do at school, they can take an active role in church life e.g. audio or video tech, readings, prayers, leading a craft/prayer station, organising social/fundraising/'campaigning' events.
- To enable more ethnic diversity across clergy in rural parishes, proper investment in good quality rural placements would improve some clergy CVs as they try to apply for first incumbencies but have experience of urban contexts only.

Under a parish system revitalised for mission:

- *'You can't fight the grain of ancient, embedded parishes in the rural context.'* You have to work with that.
- It is observed that mission and ministry are sometimes used interchangeably especially where clergy are in survival mode.
- Revitalisation so often rests on clergy as gatekeepers. Anecdotally, lack of clerical engagement with programmes like this stems from a reaction along the lines of 'not another thing'.
- Administration, fundraising and building upkeep remain hurdles to mission.
- The further one is away from those who designed a programme like Rural Hope, the more difficult it is to engage with it and not be fearful of it. There is a *'need to gain local buy-in to the concept'*¹⁷ for progress to be made.

Under all local churches, supported by their diocese, becoming communities and hubs for initial and ongoing formation:

- Many PCC and church members identify most keenly with their identity as parish or benefice and know little about how the diocese operates beyond the local.
- Where a narrative of distrust of the diocese has developed around what has been done (or not done) historically, this is an additional stress for local clergy to have to manage; this distrust is often projected onto them.
- SDF programmes with numerical targets do not easily translate to parish level where relational work and organic growth is so important to meet this bold outcome. There are dangers of church attenders being seen as commodities and heightened clergy stress where it is feared not paying parish share in full means you will lose your job.

¹⁷ 2017/18 Annual Report p. 13.

7.3. Learning identified by the diocese

'Rural is primarily about the knowing and the being known - it is about the relationships - that's a really key word - and it is about giving confidence to build on skills that people already have ...'

Dr. Jill Hopkinson

- As the first programme of this kind for the diocese, it has been a considerable learning experience. It is acknowledged that some parts of the bid were made in some degree of haste. The programme would have benefitted from *'detailed consultation with relevant local stakeholders well ahead of the time pressures of the bid writing period'*¹⁸ and followed through in involving more clergy and lay practitioners on the Steering Group. There is an art to creating a funding bid which is clear on what is expected to change as a result of a programme. They have expertise now which is to be celebrated.
- Rural Hope may have been modest in its reach, but it has created momentum. Moving forward, diocesan strategy should build on this momentum rather than dramatically changing direction on the misguided assumption 'we've done rural'. For those who have actively engaged with Rural Hope, they must not feel it's been for nothing or they may disengage from future programmes.
- While the programme delivered consistency, given the amount of money involved, stakeholders wish there had been more flexibility to respond to the unforeseen – especially COVID-19. Working to meet unrealistic targets generated a feeling of crisis-like management. In hindsight, an external interim review part way through would have been wise.
- Forcing growth within the time frame of a five-year programme isn't easy. A key learning point is how long it took to recruit people to Rural Hope posts to take the programme forward.¹⁹ Three of the Rural Field Officers were not recruited until two years into the programme. The job descriptions in the bid needed to be reworked and finding people with the specific skills required took time. Furthermore, the time scale meant that it was not possible to measure applicants to rural incumbencies as a direct consequence of Rural Hope.
- Overall, deeper, longer-term thinking is needed to respond to an *'ancient, embedded institution in generational decline'*. As the Rural Training Pathway illustrates, things that are not a 'quick fix' are still worth investing in. Equipping needs to be long-term. A long timescale is *'involved in establishing any new initiative in a rural location.'*²⁰ More nuanced strategic approaches are needed where success is understood in the context of ministerial challenges along with appropriate growth measures.

¹⁸ 2017/18 Annual Report p. 13.

¹⁹ 2017/28 Annual Report p. 13.

²⁰ 2019/20 Annual Report p. 19.

- Suggestions of what might be measured as growth in a rural context included:
 - The numbers coming forward as licensed lay worship leaders and pastoral assistants in a rural context.
 - Interaction between church attenders and other community groups, schools and organisations - the number of connections, the number of churchgoers volunteering and qualitative assessment on the depth of relationship and trust that such interaction engenders.
 - With the cure of souls more keenly felt in a rural context, an incumbent feels a responsibility for both regular churchgoers and those who never attend church – the latter possibly measured in number of pastoral visits made.
 - Gathering more data on festival services and other significant moments in the church year that draw greater numbers in a rural context.
 - Where they offer community space, tracking activities in churchyards.
 - Numbers of confirmations in rural benefices.

Where some of the above suggestions are more orientated toward growth in church health, it is important to be aware that ‘membership’ and ‘growth’ work differently in rural contexts. With smaller, settled populations (and less incomers than in suburban or urban contexts), growth includes qualitatively tracking discipleship developments in those who are occasional attenders or those who support the church but seldom attend.

- As a result of Rural Hope, the diocese will increase its emphasis on collaborative ministry, especially around the recruiting of clergy to multi-parish benefices. One stakeholder argued that a good piece of action research generating evidence on the effects of different models of ministry in multi-parish benefices would be well worth the effort, given so much time is spent talking about it. Creative thinking will also continue around buildings, their funding and their potential for mission recognising the growing interest in heritage/genealogy, pilgrimage and spiritual tourism.
- Administration and building upkeep were frequently cited as areas to address although there were markedly differing views over how to lessen these particular burdens. Even if funding were available, it is hard to source good administrators and sometimes clergy need additional training to utilise such resources fully. The diocese is exploring administrative and financial packages that parishes can use to submit data, but safeguarding cannot be done from a distance. However, in making sure multi-parish benefices have the resources they need, some interviewees commented that even small things can make a huge difference.

7.4. Further learning

- Several stakeholders touched on the issue of career progression in the church and the assumption that rural incumbents are unlikely to move onto more senior positions for lack of experience with large churches. Much like the initiatives that exist to promote women to senior positions in the church, do equivalents exist for rural? To have more diocesan bishops with a long-term vocation to rural ministry would communicate a strong message that rural ministry is important and not simply for those who cannot find jobs elsewhere.
- The gifts of the rural context for mission identified by stakeholders include:
 - A more clearly defined sense of place for contextual listening.
 - A larger ‘fringe’ of those with some degree of connection to the life of the church to work with as a starting point.
 - The opportunity to cherish the spiritual gifts of those in later life.
 - The obvious connections with environmental issues and creation care.
 - Generally-speaking, outreach will be relational from the outset – the initial stage in pioneering of ‘drawing a crowd’ (which leaders then must work intentionally with to develop deeper community) is less likely due to occur due to smaller populations.
 - Theological reflection on rich environmental metaphors e.g. rewilding, place, rootedness, agricultural cycles of fruitfulness, abundance, barrenness, death and rebirth.
- Interviewees also commented on dynamics that characterise pioneering in a rural context (as opposed to suburban or urban contexts), highlighting the importance of any programme promoting mission and growth to be realistic about the following ministerial challenges:
 - The need to be creative with very little practical resource.
 - Having to negotiate strong local power dynamics/personalities.
 - Working with an ageing and dwindling pool of volunteers.
 - Expecting congregational resistance to terms such as ‘mission’ or ‘discipleship’.
 - Having to manage a narrative of distrust toward the diocese around what has been done (or not done) historically.
 - Being willing to engage with the council/police about public policy e.g. housing, immigration.
 - Yet drawing encouragement from theological reflection around God’s surprising activity in unexpected places.

8. Conclusion

Overall, the programme design had strengths but, in practice, it was restricted by the real-life concerns and burdens of rural parish ministry, as well as lockdowns to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Programmes like this risk being an extra pressure point for already over-stretched people, contributing to a crisis-like situation for those managing it.

The overall design was wise in working with the grain of the parish system, working for transformation without draining energy away into a brand-new tier of structures. However, the requirement for teams to engage in centralised training and start widespread new worshipping communities within this five-year window was ambitious. Any programme should also seek to address the things that get in the way of those aims.

Reminiscent of the teaching of the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13, seeds can be sown but the soil may not be suitable to achieve fast growth with deep roots. As is highlighted in section 7, the programme would have benefitted from prior investment in local stakeholder consultation and more nuanced aims, outcomes and targets taking into consideration the distinctive challenges involved in rural pioneering ministry.

That said, there are pockets of growth that offer hope: a dedicated pathway for rural ministry training, a growing number of LLMs serving in rural contexts alongside clergy, the maintaining of worshipping communities through lockdown and beyond, the emergence of new initiatives and a network of enthusiasts who believe in the rural church and are committed to working collaboratively. Like seedlings, these developments need careful tending to enable further growth.

Appendices

Appendix A: Methodology

Using a mixed-methods approach, this evaluation drew on the following sources:

- 1) **Desk-based review of existing Rural Hope data** which included
 - Rural Hope initial bid
 - Monitoring and Evaluating Plan 2018 and subsequent revisions
 - Annual Reports (including case studies and budgets)
 - Steering Group minutes
 - Progress Overview reports
 - National Church's Vision and Strategy documents
 - Feedback from Flex participants
 - Impact report on Rural Days
 - Rural Training Pathway Update Report April 2022 based on research with six students
 - Diocesan website including a sample of Grapevine newsletters
- 2) Online **survey data** collected from stakeholders including:
 - All rural contacts on the diocesan information management system
 - Beneficiaries of the Ministerial Experience Scheme, Rural Placements for curates and the Rural Training Pathway
 - Leaders of new worshipping communities
- 3) Further **qualitative data** collected from stakeholders including:
 - Interviews with 24 key stakeholders by zoom, telephone or in person
 - 2 field visits and interviews with 5 leaders of new worshipping communities supported through Rural Hope
 - Zoom group interviews with 4 beneficiaries of rural placements for curates and the Rural Training Pathway

References:

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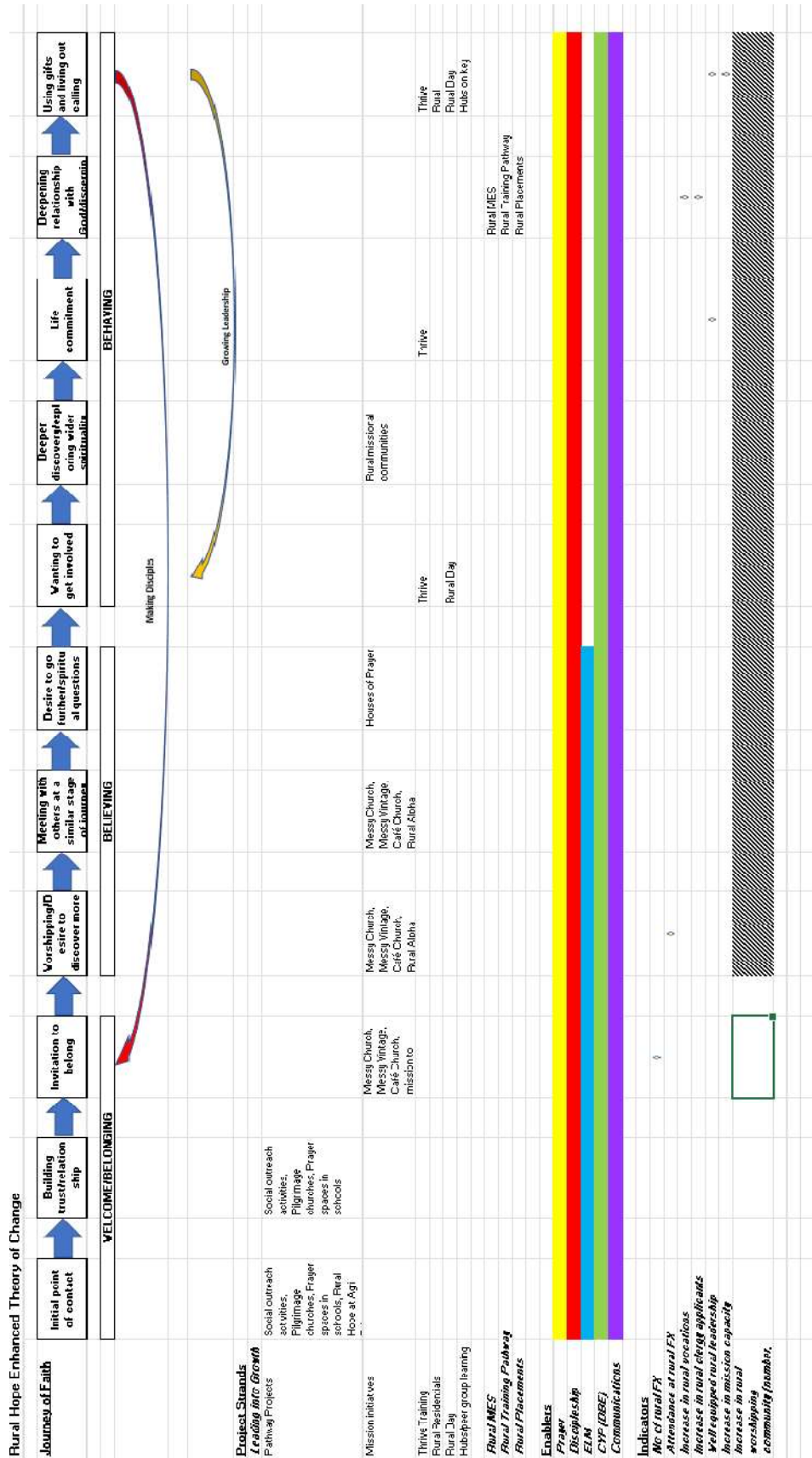
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Appendix B: Enhanced Theory of Change



Appendix C: Survey Work

As part of the evaluation, three surveys were used. The first was a general survey to gather diocesan-wide opinion on the Rural Hope Programme, while the subsequent two were used to gather information from participants in the ministry formation projects.

The general survey was sent to everyone on the diocesan ‘rural’ mailing list, used to publicise items of rural interest. It asked questions such as:

- Level of awareness of/perceptions about Rural Hope and, particularly RFOs, Thrive & Flex, Rural Days, Webinars, Village Pump etc.
- To what extent is Rural Hope perceived as having assisted with overcoming the challenges in rural ministry?
- What more is needed?

We received 251 responses that gave consent to processing. Responses came from every deanery and from all roles within the Church. However, no responses were received from people under 30 years old; the responses came from people roughly split equally between 50 and 69, and over 70 years old. The majority (73%) came from areas classed as ‘rural villages and dispersed’, and half (53%) from areas in the centre of the Index of Multiple Deprivation.

Awareness of Rural Hope

Figure 1 and Table 1 show the levels of awareness of the four projects of the Rural Hope Programme. Despite this survey being sent to the same mailing list as dozens of emails about Rural Hope, most people denied all knowledge of the programme – over 55% in each project had “never heard of” the work.

Project	Never heard of it	I’ve heard of it	I know a little bit about it	I know a good bit about it	I’m very involved
Rural Placements for curates	56.0%	24.4%	11.6%	5.2%	2.8%
Rural Ministry Training Pathway	59.8%	21.1%	13.8%	4.1%	1.2%
Rural Ministry Experience Scheme	62.8%	20.8%	11.6%	4.4%	0.4%
Local Mission Support	56.6%	21.5%	12.0%	7.2%	2.8%

Table 1: Awareness of projects (n=250)

40% of respondents had no awareness of any of the projects, while 24.4% were aware of all of them.

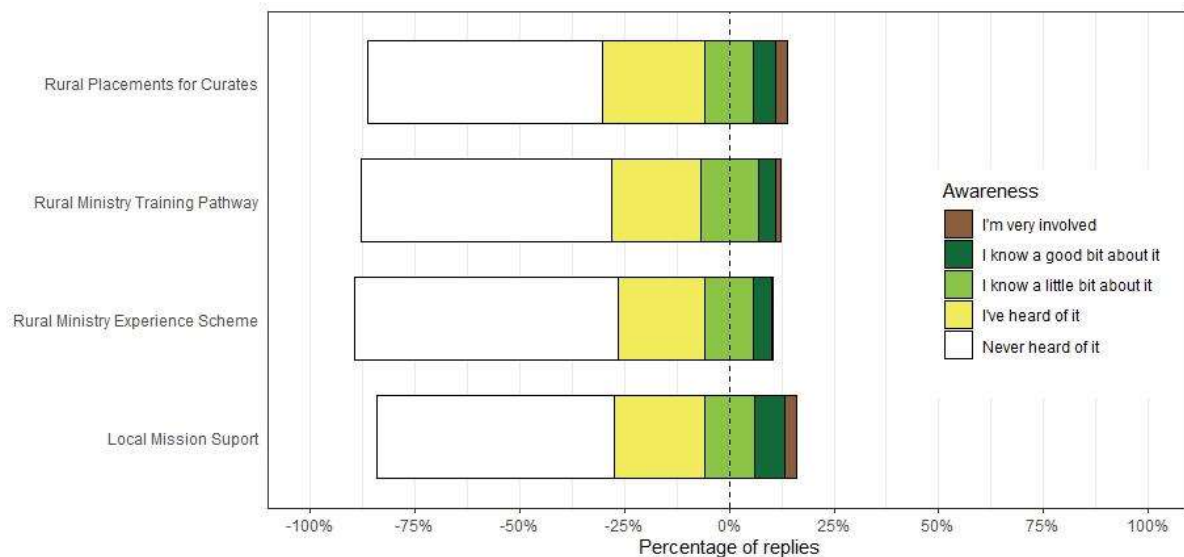


Figure 1: Levels of awareness of Rural Hope projects

The rural ministry formation projects were specifically about those training, or considering training for ordained ministry, and might therefore be expected to be less visible to the wider audience. However, it's surprising that Local Mission Support still had such a low visibility.

When broken down by deanery (Table 2), there are clear differences between deaneries and archdeaconries, perhaps reflecting engagement by parishes.

Archdeaconry	Deanery	Had heard of LMS	Archdeaconry	Deanery	Had heard of LMS
Wilts – 76% (29 responses)	Bradford	78%	Sherborne – 36.0% (74 responses)	Blackmore Vale	13%
	Calne	60%		Dorchester	60%
	Devizes	88%		Lyme Bay	53%
	Marlborough	71%		Sherborne	26%
	Pewsey	40%		Weymouth and Portland	50%
Sarum – 37% (54 responses)	Alderbury	33%	Dorset – 40% (5 responses)	Milton and Blandford	50%
	Chalke	32%		Poole	100%
	Heytesbury	67%		Purbeck	0%
	Salisbury	25%		Wimbourne	0%
	Stonehenge	60%			

Table 2: Awareness of Local Mission Support by Deanery

Awareness of Aims of Rural Hope

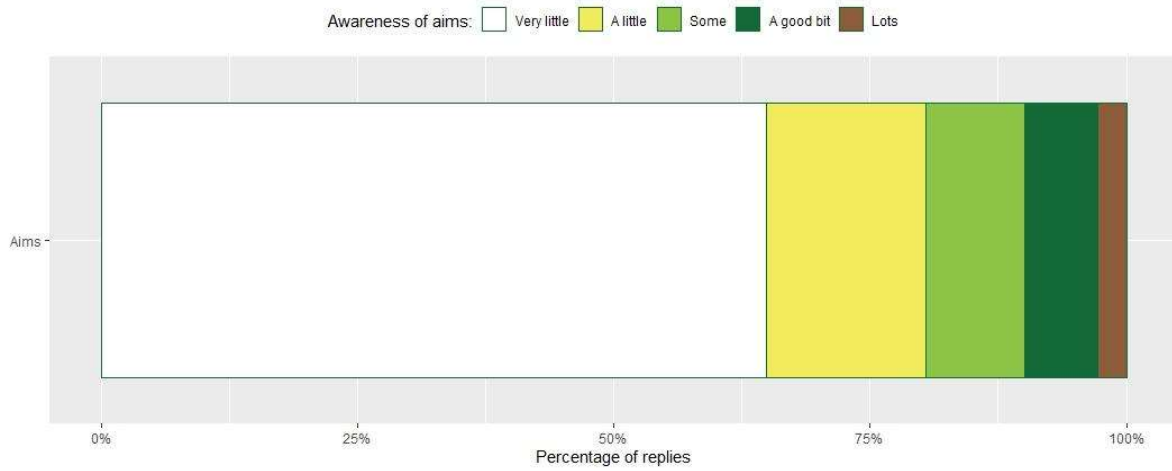


Figure 2: Awareness of the Aims of Rural Hope

Project	Very little	A little	Some	A good bit	Lots
Awareness of Aims	64.9%	15.5%	9.6	7.2	2.8%

Table 3: Awareness of the Aims of Rural Hope (n=250)

Almost two-thirds (65%) of the people responding had very little awareness of the aims of the Rural Hope Programme.

Despite the mailing list for this survey being the one used to share information about this programme, only 10% of respondents had more than “some” awareness of the programme aims.

Local Mission Support

Turning specifically to the elements of Local Mission Support, these were better received. Table 4 and Figure 3 show the percentages of people who were aware of the different elements. More than half of the respondents had heard of the Village Pump (55%) and Rural Field Officers (57%). 18% of respondents had at least used Rural Field Officers, 17% had used or been very involved with Rural Days, and 12% had used or were very involved with The Village Pump. The Flex and Thrive courses were less well known, with only 27% having heard of Flex, and 38% being aware of Thrive.

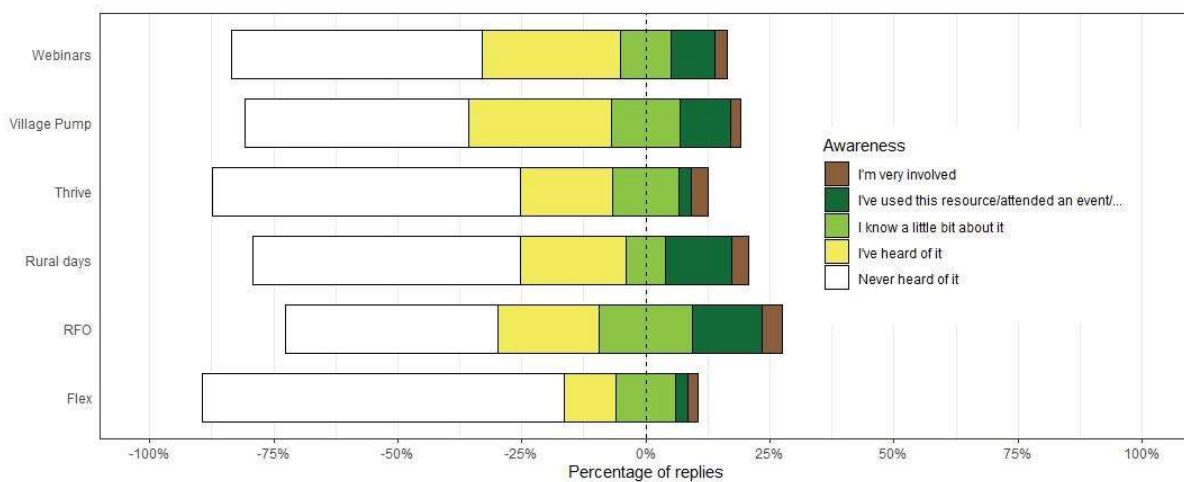


Figure 3: Awareness of Local Mission Support projects

Project components	Never heard of it	I've heard of it	I know a little bit about it	I've used this resource	I'm very involved
Webinars	50.5%	27.9%	10.3%	8.8%	2.5%
Village Pump	45.1%	28.9%	13.7%	10.3%	2.0%
Thrive	62.1%	18.7%	13.3%	2.5%	3.4%
Rural Days	54.0%	21.3%	7.9%	13.4%	3.5%
Rural Field Officers	42.6%	20.6%	18.6%	14.2%	3.9%
Flex	73.0%	10.5%	12.0%	2.5%	2.0%

Table 4: Awareness of components of Local Mission Support (n=204)

Ongoing challenges in Rural Ministry

The survey asked what challenges the respondents faced in rural ministry. The most common replies were:

- Lack of stipendiary clergy, or clergy being spread too thinly;
- Ageing congregations, difficulties in engaging children and young people;
- Uncertain financial future, burden of parish share, rising costs.

What challenges do you currently face in rural ministry?	Responses
Lack of stipendiary clergy/clergy spread too thinly	56
Ageing attendance/difficulties in engaging children and young people	45
Uncertain financial future/burden of parish share/rising costs	37
Decline in attendance	31
Lack of laity to commit to helping	22
Burden of administration/building upkeep	19
Not enough capacity to do existing work as well as outreach	18
Lack of societal interest in or awareness of church/church viewed negatively	17
Low morale/feeling isolated/rural context not understood/supported	15
Lack of confidence in talking about faith/reaching out	10
Resistance to change/lack of or confusion around vision-setting	10

Will Rural Hope assist with these challenges?

The challenges expressed through the survey are not always those that the Rural Hope programme was set up to address directly in the time available.

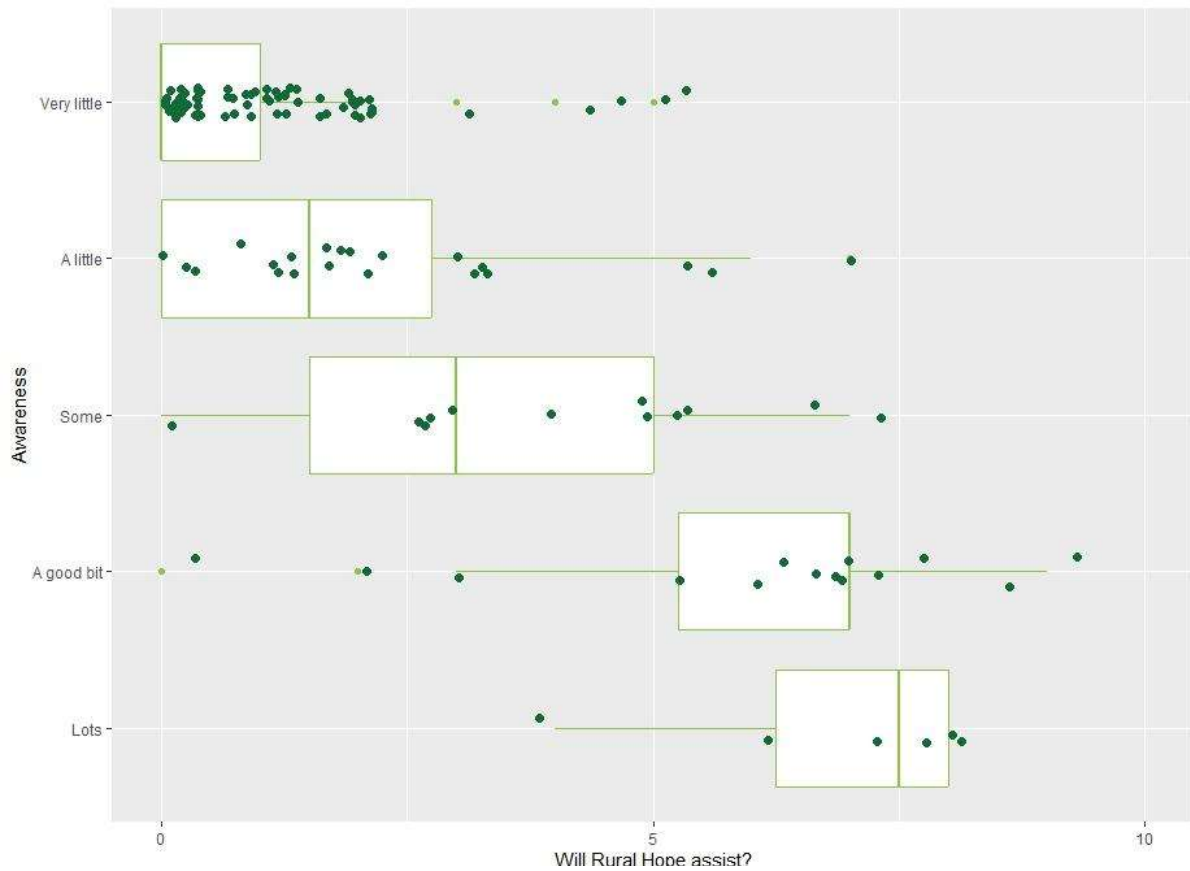


Figure 4: Will Rural Hope assist with challenges

Figure 4 shows the responses to the question, 'will Rural Hope assist with these challenges?' where 0 was 'not at all' and 10 was 'completely'. Each dark green dot represents a response, with a boxplot of the responses shown in light green. The responses are split by the level of awareness of the aims of the Rural Hope programme. For those who were less familiar with the aims (towards the top of the graph), they did not expect the programme to assist, while those who did know (lower on the plot) felt that it would better assist with the challenges.

Impact of Rural Hope

We asked participants about the lasting impact of Rural Hope, on a scale from 0 (no impact) to 10 (large impact). The results are shown in Figure 4. As might be expected, people who had no knowledge of it thought little of its potential impact. However, people who were involved, and knew what the programme was aiming to do thought that it would have more impact.

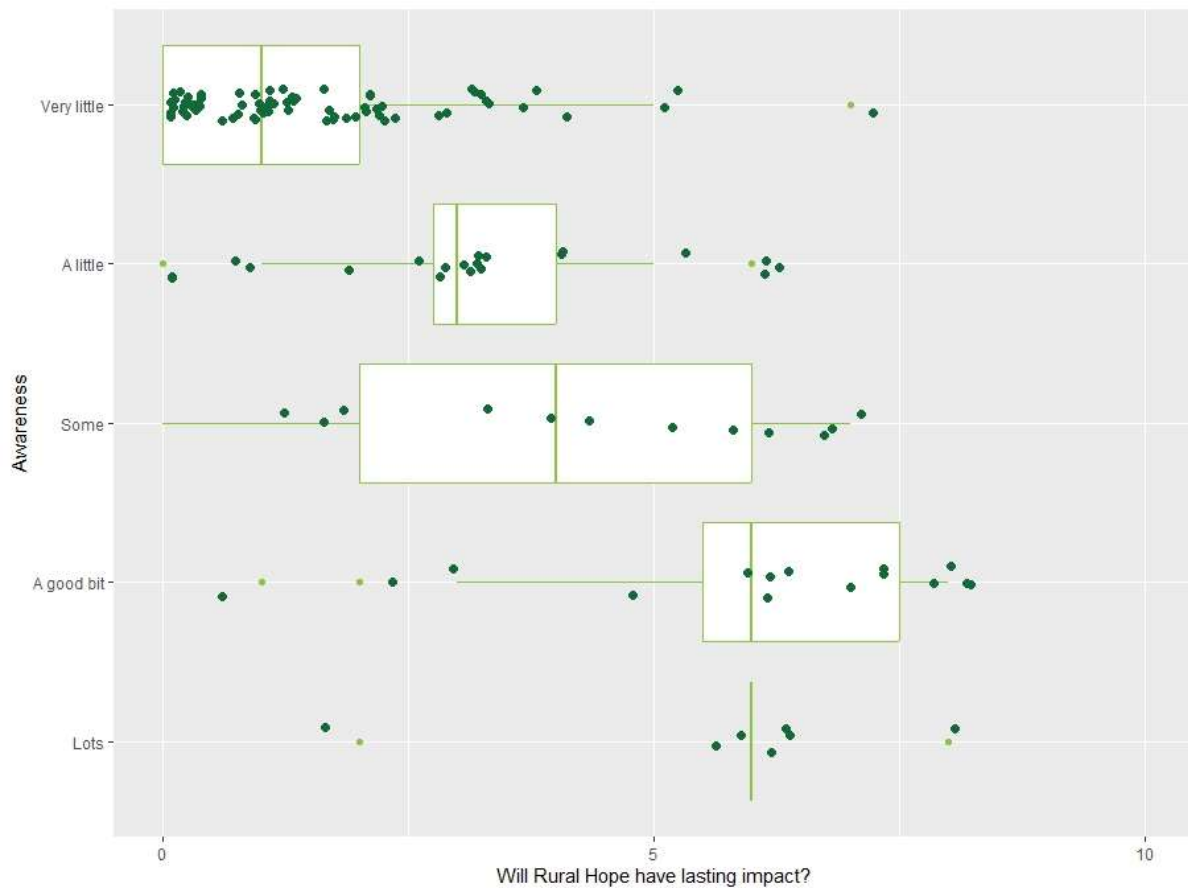


Figure 5: Impact of Rural Hope

Respondents

Those completing the surveys were invited to give their age (within a group), their role, deanery and their postcode. Postcodes allowed for the deprivation and rurality of the areas to be considered.

Age groups

Age Group	18-30	31-49	50-69	70+
	0.0%	3.5%	49.7%	46.8%

Table 5: Age groups (n=173)

The respondents are split almost equally between those aged 50-69, and those older than that. Only 3.5% of responses came from people under 50, and none from those aged 30 or younger.

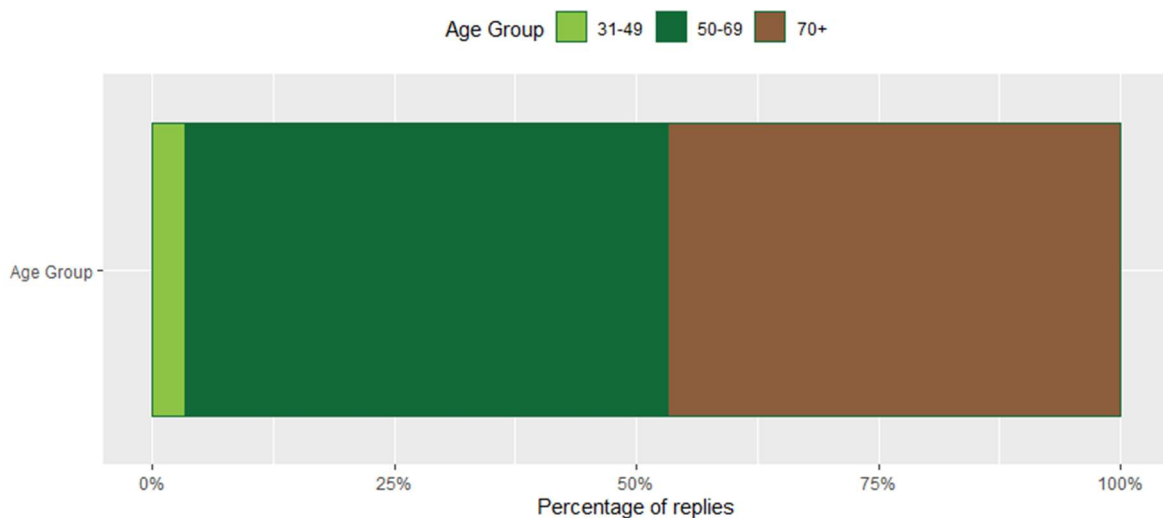


Figure 6: Age groups of participants

Role

Role	Laity	Lay minister	PCC	Clergy	Rural Dean
	3.5%	9.2%	69.4%	15.0%	2.9%

Table 6: Roles of participants (n=173)

The majority of responses came from members of the PCC or other helpers, followed by Clergy and Lay Ministers.

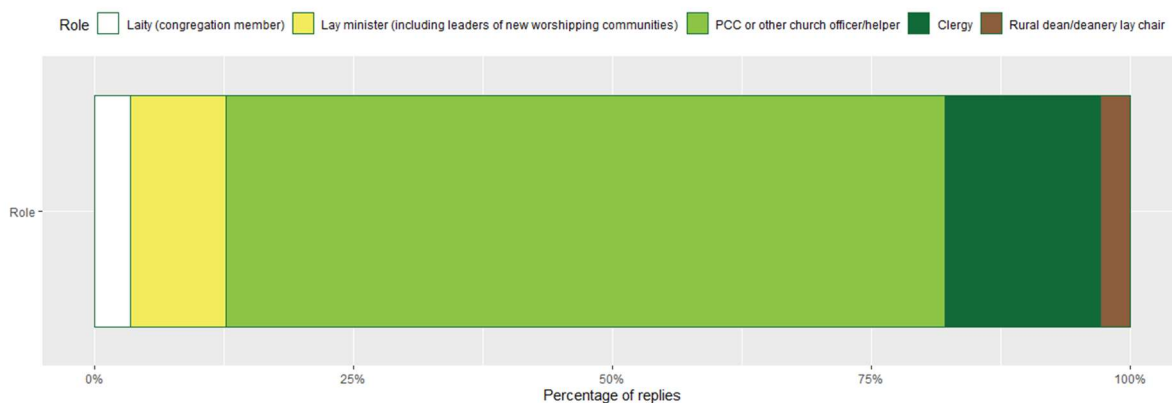


Figure 7: Roles of participants

Deaneries

Archdeaconry	Deanery	Responses	Archdeaconry	Deanery	Responses
Wilts – 22.7%	Bradford	5.2%	Sherborne – 43.0%	Blackmore Vale	8.7%
	Calne	2.9%		Dorchester	8.7%
	Devizes	4.7%		Lyme Bay	8.7%
	Marlborough	4.1%		Sherborne	15.7%
	Pewsey	5.8%		Weymouth and Portland	1.2%
Sarum – 31.3%	Alderbury	3.5%	Dorset – 3.0%	Milton and Blandford	1.2%
	Chalke	11.0%		Poole	0.6%
	Heytesbury	1.7%		Purbeck	0.6%
	Salisbury	9.3%		Wimbourne	0.6%
	Stonehenge	5.8%			

Table 7: Responses per deanery and archdeaconry (n=172)

Only 3% of responses came from the Archdeaconry of Dorset while almost half came from the Archdeaconry of Sherborne.

Area Characteristics

158 respondents gave a postcode which could be used to identify the characteristics of their area. We consider the DEFRA urban-rural classification, and the Index of Multiple Deprivation here.²¹

DEFRA urban-rural classification

Area type	Urban city and town	Rural town and fringe	Rural village and dispersed
	8.2%	18.4%	73.4%

Table 8: Responses by DEFRA area type (n=158)

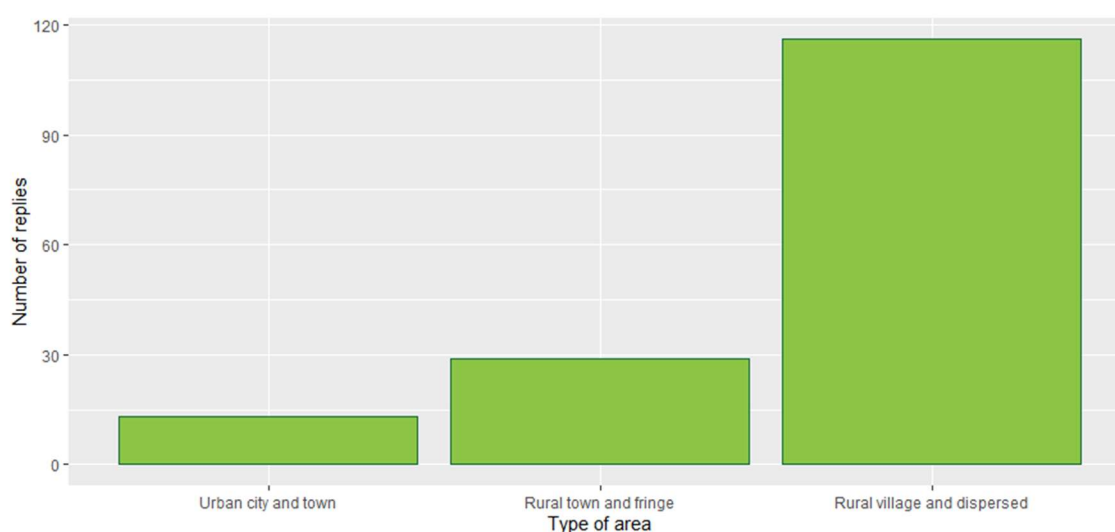


Figure 8: Area classifications

²¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/rural-urban-classification>;
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>

Levels of Deprivation

The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) ranks small areas using a basket of measures related to poverty and deprivation. Here we consider the deciles (10% bands) from which responses were received.

IMD decile	% responses	IMD decile	% responses
1	0.0%	6	28.5%
2	0.0%	7	13.3%
3	1.3%	8	5.7%
4	11.4%	9	12.0%
5	24.7%	10	3.2%

Table 9: Responses by Deprivation level

There were no responses from areas in the most deprived 20% (deciles 1 and 2). While there are areas of high deprivation within the diocese, they tend to be within towns, rather than in the rural areas. Around half of the responses came from areas with close to median deprivation (5 and 6).

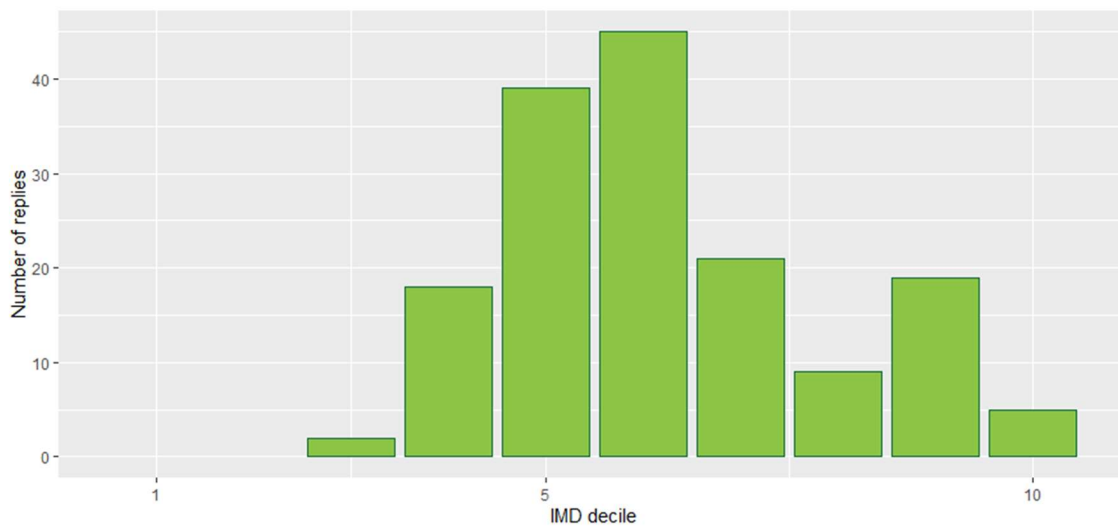


Figure 9: IMD levels of participants' areas

Rural Ministry Formation

This survey attracted 25 responses, split across:

- Rural Ministry Experience Scheme – 2
- Rural Ministry Training Pathway – 13
- Rural Placements for Curates – 9

14 of the responses came from people aged 50-59, 9 from 31-49, 1 from 18-30.

Comments were generally positive, e.g.

'I've come out of the rural pathways expecting that rural ministry will play a significant role in my future career in a way that it may not have done if the pathway hadn't existed.'

'Understanding the nuances of rural church and church in the rural landscape has been key.'

'Ministerial training on the Rural Pathway has made a really significant difference in how I experience rural ministry and mission. I understand the challenges that are specific to remote rural village, the various stakeholders and the challenges and opportunities for mission and ministry.'

'Being able to get such hands on experience so early on in my ordination journey (on the MES scheme), confirmed my calling to rural ministry.'

New Worshipping Communities

This survey attracted 7 responses.

3 of the responses came from people aged 50-59, 1 from 31-49, 2 from those 70 or over. One was a lay-person, the others were from clergy. 2 were from Stonehenge deanery, 1 each from Pewsey, Bradford, Marlborough and Heytesbury.

Comments included:

'Fun Church was already in my mind but Covid delayed its beginning. Decided to begin Sept 2021 and encouraged by Thrive and Rural Hope.'

'The team provided the necessary spark and encouragement. So an idea that had been floating around for a long time (Coffee for mums after school drop-off) came to fruition, took shape, and has gradually developed / been led in a slightly different direction.'

'People who wouldn't come to church otherwise are joining in, and it feels like a community, not separate people'

'From a start in Sept 2021 with no children in church, we now have at least 10+ families and growing. Our last service had 20 children and 33 adults with some away. Encouraging'

'I think the best thing was being able to have an ongoing (non-rushed) relationship with your 'personal' consultant. Rural ministry needs to be 'bespoke'.'

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