



Commission for Rural Communities

Tackling rural disadvantage

Rural disadvantage Priorities for action



June 2006

Commission for Rural Communities

(an operating division of the Countryside Agency)

This report is one of a number of products produced as part of the Commission for Rural Communities' first major thematic study to gather evidence about rural disadvantage. This report provides a short summary of our findings and presents priorities for action to tackle rural disadvantage.

Other products in the study:

Rural disadvantage: Reviewing the evidence

A review and assessment of existing research and documentation relating to rural disadvantage and the policy responses.

Rural disadvantage: Hidden voices

A DVD film of real life experiences of living in rural England.

Rural disadvantage: Futures thinkpiece

A report to the Commission reviewing futures related literature and summarising recent thinking about the future of rural disadvantage

Rural disadvantage: Quality of life and disadvantage amongst older people – a pilot study

A report to the Commission on new research to understand better how older people living in rural areas experience disadvantage.

Attitudes to Rural disadvantage: A segmentation analysis

A report to the Commission on new research on rural attitudes to disadvantage. Available in pdf form on the Commission's website.

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For further information on the Commission's work generally visit:
www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

Rural disadvantage

Priorities for action

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Foreword

Tackling rural disadvantage is at the core of the Commission for Rural Communities' purpose, so my fellow Board members and I decided from the outset that we should conduct a thorough and up to date review of the evidence base on this important topic. One key outcome of that review is this publication on priorities for action, which we hope will form the basis for productive discussions with policy makers and organisations who can make a difference. It will also be a foundation stone in helping to shape the future work of the Commission itself.

The review shows that rural England is not simply a place of privilege and prosperity: it provides a sobering reminder that disadvantage is experienced within all types of rural areas and across most aspects of life. The experience of disadvantage will be different from the typical urban experience, since it is likely to be surrounded by the better off. It may remain hidden as people are ashamed to ask for help.

Our review points to areas of policy where there is little regard for the rural dimension. For example, rural employment disadvantage is not just about unemployment – the focus of most policy – but is more often about job insecurity, poor quality work or lack of training, where some face repeated periods of worklessness. One significant disappointment is how few policy evaluations have tested the degree of success of policies or programmes in rural areas.

Inequality within rural communities is a key concern. It is a matter of social justice that everyone should have a decent chance in life and receive the same basic standards of service. Providing services to smaller or scattered rural communities can be more expensive, but this is no excuse for providing poor service levels to those who need them most.

The opportunity afforded by the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review must be seized to look carefully at the issues highlighted by this report. Further efforts to address rural disadvantage would help to achieve over-arching Government objectives for sustainable communities, social justice and community cohesion. Careful thought will also be required to the way in which policies are designed and delivered. It is vital that policies to tackle disadvantage are not measured by over-simplistic targets that can be achieved by concentrating on urban areas alone, where those in the target group are easier to reach and the numbers are greater.

This report gives a clear indication where action is most needed and most urgent. The role of government will be critical, but there is much here too that those in the wider public sector and in the private and community sectors can take forward. My Board and I are convinced that addressing those priorities for action now – as well as bringing hope to many – would prove a sound investment for the future of rural England.

Rev Dr Stuart Burgess

Chairman of the Countryside Agency and Rural Advocate

Executive summary

Our review of research evidence on rural disadvantage shows a significant minority of rural people facing a range of different forms of disadvantage. This will continue into the future, unless there is concerted action to address this challenge.

Our report sets out Priorities for action to tackle rural disadvantage, as the start of a dialogue on how this could be achieved. Action is required on 4 levels:

- **People:** actions to help individuals overcome their disadvantage
- **Places:** actions to help improve local opportunities more generally
- **Perceptions:** actions to change attitudes and culture that lead to rural disadvantage being hidden or ignored
- **Processes:** actions to ensure policy is designed and implemented in a way that meets rural needs.

There are 3 critical factors for rural people, in both experiencing and escaping disadvantage, that policies should address:

- **Financial poverty:** assisting the disproportionate numbers in rural areas who are on no wages, low wages or on small pensions is critical. Ensuring that people take up their benefit entitlement and receive the benefits of the National Minimum Wage are requirements to addressing low rural incomes.
- **Access poverty:** improving rural people's access to transport or providing services and opportunities in ways that overcome the need to travel is vital. Local accessibility (transport) planning should be applied in a way which benefits those without their own transport.
- **Network poverty:** The part played by informal contact with, and help from, friends and neighbours should not be under-estimated in tackling disadvantage. Support for venues that provide this is important, including community halls, village shops and post offices.

Attitudes and perceptions can compound and hide disadvantage, with half of rural people not recognising "disadvantage" in their locality. There is inadequate awareness by policy makers, service providers and the public at large of the existence of rural disadvantage. Ways of overcoming the stigma associated with it are needed.

A key theme from our review is the need for **better rural proofing**. National policy needs both to recognise and operate in ways that address rural circumstances, so policies bring real benefit to those with the greatest needs, wherever they live. There is little monitoring and evaluation of whether policies are actually working in rural areas. Rural proofing should not end with policy design and this is something that could easily be addressed.

Better rural proofing also means **better targeting** of action and **better resourcing** to enable delivery. National minimum standards are required in target setting, so that the difficulties of delivering in rural areas do not prove to be a disincentive to action. Rural service providers require an equitable allocation of resources to enable them to deliver effectively and rurality needs to be properly reflected in resource allocations. The Comprehensive Spending Review is a key opportunity to address rural disadvantage.



Introduction

This report sets out the main findings from our review of rural disadvantage and highlights priorities for action.

When the Commission for Rural Communities was launched in 2005,¹ we announced that we would undertake a major baseline study on rural disadvantage. The study has reviewed the evidence on:

- What disadvantage is in rural England
- Why it occurs
- What the policy responses have been and whether they work.

Tackling rural disadvantage is at the heart of the Commission for Rural Communities' purpose, so creating an authoritative and up to date evidence base was critical. The intention is that this will both help to identify priorities for policy actions by others and to shape the Commission's own future work programme.

After wide consultation at the outset to scope the study, the main focus has been upon a literature review of existing research and documentation that relates to rural disadvantage and the policy responses. This was supplemented by new research on rural attitudes to disadvantage (a gap identified at the start), by some pilot research with disadvantaged older people in rural areas (building on recent urban research) and by work to consider the future of rural disadvantage. The study focussed on disadvantage as experienced by people living in rural areas, rather than disadvantage in places or by businesses.

Achieving social justice is a key theme of current policy agendas. One of three priorities in the Government's 2004 Rural Strategy is securing 'social justice for all', tackling rural social exclusion, wherever it occurs, and providing fair access to services and opportunities for all rural people. Another priority is economic and social regeneration in those rural areas with the greatest needs. Although the strategy is a Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' (Defra) document, delivering its priorities requires cross-government action. This study is intended to contribute to that thinking, ensuring that rural needs are sufficiently understood and considered.

The Commission looks forward to discussing its findings and priorities for action with government and a wide range of other interested parties.

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Definitions

Disadvantage was taken to mean “a wide set of difficulties preventing people from participating fully in society, including poverty, but also, for example, limiting factors in one’s life situation, such as lack of skills, unequal levels of health and well-being associated with economic disadvantage, and discrimination”^{1,2}. In line with recent analysis by the Social Exclusion Unit and the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, the literature was then examined under 12 disadvantage headings shown in Figure 1.

Wherever possible, the study adopted the new definition of rural that was set out in the Government’s Rural Strategy, published in 2004.³ This covers all settlements with a population of under 10,000 and is further subdivided by settlement size and population sparsity. As this definition implies, rural England is far from uniform and policies to address disadvantage need to be sensitive and adaptable to this diversity.

Figure 1.

Types of disadvantage



Transport and ICT are means to participation rather than being a form of participation.

1. The CRC was launched as an operating division of the Countryside Agency. It will become a stand-alone body once vested in October 2006.
2. This definition is from a 2004 Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, Tackling Disadvantage: A 20 Year Enterprise.
3. The rural definition was developed by the Countryside Agency, Defra, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the Office for National Statistics and the Welsh Assembly.

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Findings: state of the evidence base

There is an ever-growing evidence base available about disadvantage and social exclusion. However, much of this does not look specifically at rural issues, even where the research has national coverage. Similarly, there is a wealth of information about rural issues, but often this has not pulled out who, or why some, are disadvantaged in rural areas.

There is, nevertheless, a range of contemporary quantitative and qualitative research information on rural disadvantage. In particular, there is good information on rural low income and its causes, barriers to employment, access to affordable housing and other housing related disadvantage issues, such as fuel poverty, and transport related disadvantage. There have also been a number of studies into various aspects of access to services. Research has been undertaken on some important rural vulnerable or at-risk groups, especially younger people and older people.

Although there is information available about rural disadvantage, a large number of different definitions of rural have been used, ranging from local authority or other administrative area classifications to very subjective definitions, such as that used in the English House Condition Surveys. In addition, some research does not differentiate between different types of rural areas, although information available suggests a complex relationship between sparsity, remoteness and settlement size. The new rural definition has only been applied to some datasets and, so far, used only in a small number of research projects. This means that much of the information is not comparing 'like with like' and often fails to capture the diversity within rural England.

Some research has simply compared average levels of rural disadvantage to urban disadvantage, yet contrasting rural and urban areas in this way is too crude. Although rural areas often 'on average' compare favourably with urban areas, this does not mean that there is no disadvantage in rural areas.

The use of the new rural definition is not widespread yet

Is policy working?

Policy evaluations

One of the most significant gaps in the evidence base relates to the lack of robust information on whether policies aimed at tackling disadvantage are working in rural areas or not. This relates to both national level policies and pilots and new initiatives. Some policy evaluations have included rural areas in their case study selection, but then failed to pull out the rural dimension in the subsequent analysis. Many policy evaluations tend to be more process oriented (looking for example at how things are working), rather than outcome evaluations (assessing whether the policy has achieved its aim). Whilst this is not necessarily related only to evaluations of the rural impacts (and indeed it is difficult to demonstrate cause and effect), this is clearly an area where the lack of good information hinders appropriate policy making.

Level of needs?

Level of needs

Another major gap is a proper understanding of the level of need (the scale of disadvantage) compared to service use in rural areas. Whilst this has received some attention in health research through the distance decay studies, there is generally little robust information about need. Examples include interpreting a low take-up of means-tested welfare benefits as indicative of low levels of need (despite the apparent similar levels of people below the poverty line in rural and urban areas). Information so far tends to measure geographical availability of services rather than accessibility. Much more research is required on the impact of the accessibility of services and other factors, such as cultural barriers on the need for, and uptake of, services and the direct impact this might have on disadvantage.

Experience of disadvantage? Wide? Deep? Concentrated? Persistent?

Type of experience

A third key gap in the evidence relates to information on the extent to which rural disadvantage is experienced in different ways, such as 'wide' (where someone experiences only one form of disadvantage); 'deep' (where someone faces several forms of disadvantage); 'concentrated' (where disadvantage is concentrated in certain places); and 'persistent' disadvantage (where disadvantage is experienced over time or the course of someone's life). The long-term effects of experiencing disadvantage for a short time (such as being unemployed for a few months rather than a few years), or the cumulative effects of several events (such as seasonal unemployment) are unlikely to be different between urban and rural areas, but their causes and solutions are likely to differ. Where rural research has investigated persistent disadvantage, this has mainly been in relation to moves in and out of poverty.

The ability to influence policy decisions and priorities, such as spending reviews, is weakened by this poor evidence base, especially given the emphasis in policy-making on 'hard' or robust evidence.

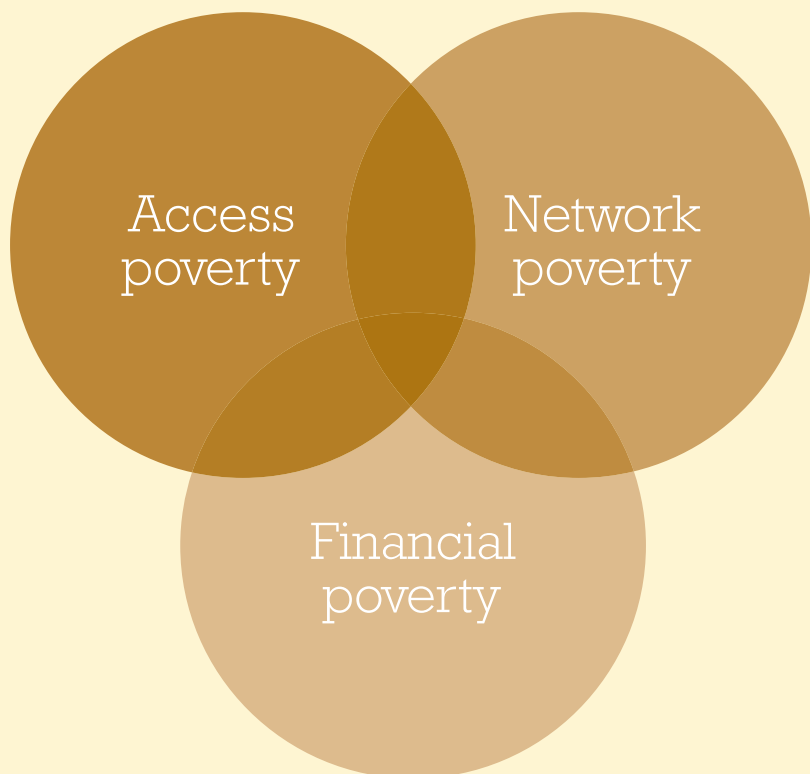
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Findings: what the evidence tells us about rural disadvantage

In many ways, disadvantage in rural England is no different to disadvantage in more urban areas. Disadvantage in one 'sphere' of participation can often spill over into others and many causes are interrelated. In some cases, levels of disadvantage are worse in rural areas (eg fuel poverty, housing conditions, low pay); in others, rural areas seem to contain similar numbers of people facing disadvantage (such as on low income) or fewer than in urban areas (eg burglaries).

It is clear from our review that there are 3 key issues which, in general, influence both someone's experience of, and ability to overcome, disadvantage in rural areas: their financial resources; their physical access to goods, services and activities (or their ability to use modern technology to overcome the need for physical access); and their social resources and networks. We have called these financial poverty, access poverty and network poverty.

Figure 2.
3 types of poverty



1 in 5

Research from various surveys and analysis suggests that around 1 in 5 people live in poverty in rural areas and that nearly half of those in poverty are in working households.

1. Financial poverty

Financial poverty in rural areas is associated not only with people who are unable to work, but also with people in work. Research from various surveys and analysis suggest that around 1 in 5 people live in poverty in rural areas and that nearly half of those in poverty are in working households. Under-employment (those who work intermittently) and marked seasonal variations in unemployment are more common in rural areas than elsewhere, particularly in those areas where agriculture or tourism provides much of the local employment. A high proportion of those who are economically inactive, but want a job, in rural areas are prevented from working due to a limiting long-term illness, or through other barriers, such as a lack of childcare or transport. Financial poverty in rural areas is also highly concentrated amongst older people, with around one-quarter of those in poverty in pensioner households. Little is known about rural financial inclusion, such as access to bank accounts, affordable credit, levels of debt, savings and wealth accumulation.

2. Access poverty

Transport plays an essential role in allowing people to access employment, education, health services, shopping and leisure, and problems with transport make a significant contribution to a whole range of different types of disadvantage. Despite high levels of household car ownership, transport-related disadvantage is more widespread in rural areas than might be commonly perceived. A third of adults in rural areas do not have personal access to a car, either because they do not drive or live in non-car owning households, or because the car is mainly used by somebody else in the household.

In recent years, ICT has become increasingly vital in enabling people to participate fully in society. It can be used to access a wide range of services, such as benefits, healthcare, online shopping, improving skills, information and advice, as well as for personal and social uses. For those who can afford their own personal access, or have access locally, it provides a way of overcoming the problems of physical distance to goods, services and activities and reducing the need to travel. However, there are fewer public access points in rural areas and low-income households in rural areas use Digital TV and interactive services less than those on higher incomes.

3. Network poverty

Family, friends, social networks and local community support play a critical role in helping people either to avoid or to overcome their experience of disadvantage. They can help in simply giving emotional support or more practical support, such as help with shopping, transport and money. A number of links have been made to the benefits of social interaction (such as better mental health and a link with longevity). Despite the commonly perceived strong rural community spirit, a number of issues point to the increasing importance of network poverty and social isolation leading to disadvantage, as rural social networks are breaking down. For example, demographic change, the lack of affordable housing, the growth of commuting (with less free time and involvement in the local community), the forecast growth in mental health problems, the increase in lone person households, the growth of ICT based approaches and more remote methods of working, rather than face-to-face contact, are having an impact on traditional networks.

Perceptions

Our review also highlighted the importance of cultural attitudes in influencing rural disadvantage, leading to people delaying seeking help, trying to cope by themselves, or hiding their disadvantage, for example in experiencing mental health problems, domestic violence, or financial poverty. The fear of receiving criticism or being marginalised, the traditional values of pride and coping strategies of self-reliance can all lead to disadvantaged people not wishing to draw attention to themselves, the hidden nature of disadvantage and the under reporting of the extent and nature of problems.

48%

48% of rural people (those in clusters 3 and 4) were unlikely to recognise the existence of disadvantage in their area.

Our new survey⁴ of attitudes of people living in rural areas towards disadvantage confirmed previous anecdotal evidence that the existence of rural disadvantage is not widely acknowledged. Overall, 38% of people thought that people did not struggle to find the money for basics and 42% agreed 'there is no disadvantage around here'.

A cluster analysis of responses to a range of attitudinal questions in the survey, points to 4 broad groupings of people in rural areas based on their attitudes to disadvantage:

- **Group 1** (around 27% of rural people) were the most likely to think it would be embarrassing to ask for help, felt that people didn't talk about their financial problems locally and were also the most likely to feel that their local area would be a better place if 'people minded their own business'. This group was the most likely not to feel part of their local community and had the least social contact with others.
- **Group 2** (24%) were much more likely to recognise the existence of disadvantage locally and to have supportive views of the welfare state.
- **Group 3** (29%) generally had less supportive views on the welfare state and were the least likely to recognise the existence of problems, such as difficulties in finding a job, housing or money for the basics. They believed strongly in an idyllic rural lifestyle and felt part of the local community.
- **Group 4** (19%) also shared the same ideas of an idyllic rural community as Group 3, with little acknowledgement about rural disadvantage, but had softer views towards the welfare state.

This suggests that roughly half the rural population have a strong belief in 'the rural idyll' and despite generally being involved in, or feeling part of, local community life, they did not recognise the problems of a significant minority of those living in rural areas. The group most likely to be experiencing disadvantage (such as finding it difficult to live on their present income), Group 1, were also least involved in local community life (although it should be noted that disadvantage was experienced in all 4 of the groupings). The lack of local social interaction of Group 1, combined with their views on keeping problems to themselves, reveals how rural disadvantage continues to be hidden. The survey also suggests that understanding people's views on disadvantage is not as simple as the difference between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'.

4. Brunwin T, Clemens S, Deakin G, Inglis G (2006) Attitudes to Rural Disadvantage: a segmentation analysis. A report to the Commission for Rural Communities by BMRB Social Research

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Findings: the future of rural disadvantage

The main trends affecting rural England are an important context when considering disadvantage – its causes, its manifestation and appropriate policy responses. They include:

- **Counter-urbanisation:** there is a net flow of about 100,000 people per year from urban to rural areas. However, one group – young adults – are moving out of rural areas;
- **Affluence:** in addition to generally rising levels of income, migration patterns are bringing mainly higher income groups to rural areas;
- **Mobility:** car ownership is high among rural households. In villages in less-sparse areas 90% of households own a car. Half have more than one car;
- **Ageing:** the rural population is older than the urban population, especially in sparse areas. In villages in sparse areas, 28% of the population is aged over 60; and it is forecast that rural areas will age more quickly than elsewhere;
- **One person households:** rural areas have fewer one person households than urban areas, but projections suggest that they will grow significantly in number;
- **Diversified economies:** agriculture no longer dominates most rural economies. The profile of employment by sector is now quite similar to that nationally.

As with the evidence on contemporary rural disadvantage, there has been limited thinking and research about disadvantage in rural areas into the future. There has been a recent growth in futures work on rural areas in general, which has included brief examinations of disadvantage, but these fail to provide any detailed understanding of the future of rural disadvantage. Yet, much of the more in-depth futures studies on disadvantage and social exclusion tend not to consider the nature of rural issues.

Nevertheless, five key trends and drivers have been suggested in most future studies as influential in the future of rural disadvantage: the continuance of counter-urbanisation; changing demography and the ageing society; levels of economic growth; transport and accessibility issues; and affordable housing supply.

The review suggested some particular groups that might be at risk of disadvantage in the future. These included people with no access to private transport, even if there were a car within the household; older people; low-income households not taking up their benefit entitlement; those without the support of extended family networks because of spiraling house prices and those living alone; and people who are in and out of low quality, poorly paid occupations within tourism, care or agriculture, as well as migrant workers.

100,000

Counter-urbanisation: there is a net flow of about 100,000 people per year from urban to rural areas. However, one group – young adults – are moving out of rural areas.

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Priorities for action

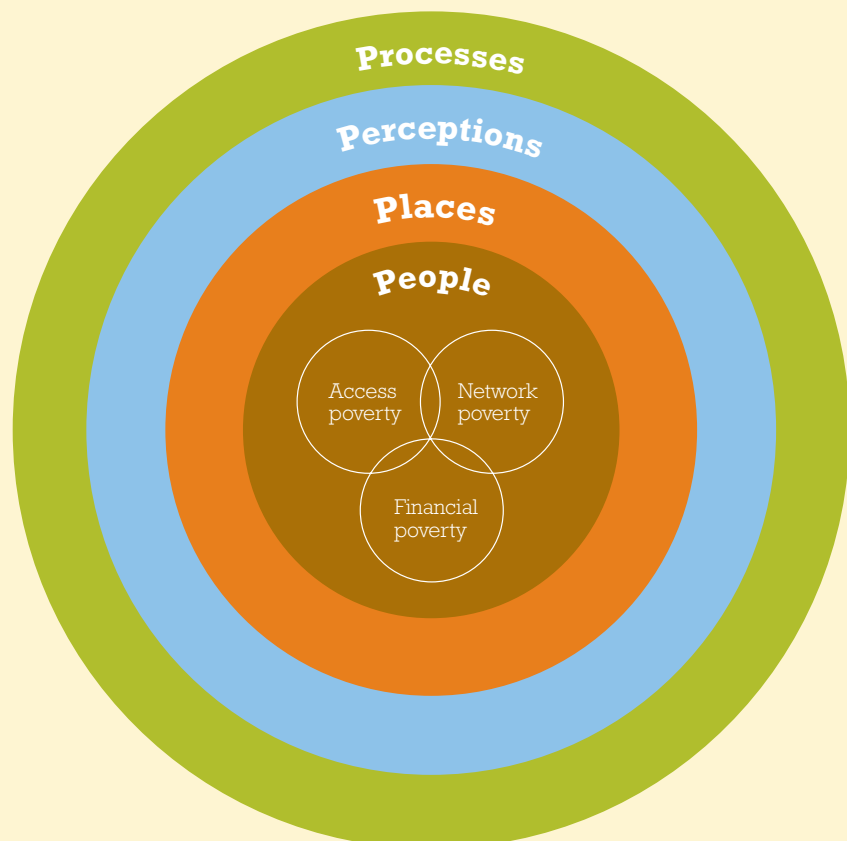
We have set out priorities for key issues and cross-cutting themes that we consider to be important now and into the future, though we have not included an action point for every issue that we have uncovered in our review of the evidence. These are not detailed recommendations of how and when action is needed, nor who should take forward the work, although we have made some suggestions for ways forward. We intend these priorities for action to form the start of a debate on how they should be achieved.

Action to tackle rural disadvantage is required on 4 levels:

- **People:** actions to help individuals overcome their disadvantage
- **Places:** actions to help improve local opportunities more generally
- **Perceptions:** actions to change attitudes and culture that lead to rural disadvantage being hidden or ignored
- **Processes:** actions to ensure policy is designed and implemented in a way that meets rural needs.

Action to meet the specific needs of an individual (for example, addressing why someone can't work through their lack of appropriate skills) needs to go hand-in-hand with more general policies to improve local opportunities (such as aiming to increase the number of job opportunities in the area). Similarly, action to change attitudes and policy approaches is also required. Priorities are set out below for each of these levels. Given the interrelationships between different forms of disadvantage, action in one of the policy areas may have a number of benefits.

Figure 3.
4 levels of priorities for action



People:

actions to help individuals overcome their disadvantage

Places:

actions to help improve local opportunities more generally

Perceptions:

actions to change attitudes and culture that lead to rural disadvantage being hidden or ignored

Processes:

actions to ensure policy is designed and implemented in a way that meets rural needs

People:

actions to help individuals overcome their disadvantage

Our review suggests that prioritising policies at an individual level needs to tackle someone's financial poverty, access poverty and network poverty.

Tackling financial poverty

Priority 1: Ensuring people take up benefits they are entitled to

There is a widespread belief, supported by some limited available evidence, that take-up rates of benefits for older and unemployed people are low in rural areas. It is suggested that the reasons for this are both attitudinal (a rural culture of independence and self-sufficiency) and a result of accessibility and transport problems. There is also evidence that poverty in self-employment is more common in rural areas and it is probable that many self-employed people on low incomes are eligible for benefits but may not be aware of this. Benefits, such as Income Support and Jobseekers Allowance, act as 'passports' to other types of entitlements, such as Warmfront Grants to tackle fuel poverty, as well as directly improving people's income levels. Tax credits are particularly valuable in tackling rural financial disadvantage caused by low pay and pensioner credit too is crucial to older people. Further research is necessary on patterns of benefit take-up in England to clarify whether take-up of particular types of benefit is lower in rural areas and the possible reasons for this. Nevertheless, given the broad consensus that rural take-up is low, there is a need to reinforce attempts to improve take-up of both in-work and out-of-work benefits. This should include measures to increase take-up among the self-employed who are eligible, including ensuring that benefits advisers are appropriately trained to support this group.

Priority 2: Ensuring employees benefit from the National Minimum Wage

There is limited information on the impact of the National Minimum Wage in rural areas, but there is some evidence that awareness of it is low among some groups of vulnerable workers. Where job opportunities are limited, people may be less willing to report underpayment. Research is required to establish the impacts of the National Minimum Wage in rural areas, the relationship with the agricultural wages order and the extent to which potentially vulnerable workers in rural areas (such as migrant workers) and those in small rural workplaces are benefiting. Given the lower levels of pay in rural areas and that one-half of households in poverty are working, raising awareness and ensuring compliance would ensure this key policy does tackle rural disadvantage. It would also be helpful in tackling low pay, if the National Minimum Wage kept pace with inflation.

Priority 3: Ensuring support for unemployed people is tailored to the needs of those who work only intermittently or seasonally

Those who register as unemployed during short spells out of work are unlikely to benefit at present from the more intensive advice and assistance available through the New Deal programmes for the unemployed, since this is only generally available to those who have been registered as unemployed for a minimum length of time. People may be invited to join the programme earlier at the discretion of their personal adviser, but it is not clear how often this happens in practice. Rural people relying on seasonal or intermittent employment are thus trapped in a cycle of periods of low paid employment, followed by short

spells of unemployment. There is also some evidence that they do not always identify themselves as unemployed in the periods when they are out-of-work, preferring to get by using various coping strategies, in part because the process of claiming for short periods may be considered too onerous. The New Deal programmes need to help those trapped in low paid seasonal employment in rural areas gain new skills and new opportunities for better paid, more permanent employment. There could also be more promotional work to ensure people in this in-and-out-of-work cycle are aware of help that is available.

Priority 4: Helping people with limiting long-term illnesses and disabilities into work

A high proportion of those who are economically inactive, but want a job, in rural areas are prevented from working due to a limiting long-term illness. People with disabilities and long-term health problems living in rural areas face particular barriers, due to the limited employment opportunities and the lack of transport and childcare. They are also less likely to have benefited from existing initiatives targeted at helping such people back into work. There is some evidence that initiatives, such as the New Deal for Disabled People, have focused on those who are easiest to help and have failed to reach those who face greater difficulties in finding work. One way forward is that the implementation of measures, such as the rollout of Pathways to Work, included in the Welfare Reform Green Paper, should be designed carefully to ensure that they meet rural needs.

Priority 5: Ensuring people's skills and training needs are met

The nature of much employment in rural areas in small and micro businesses (11–49 employees and 0–10 employees) means that employees are less likely to receive training through their employer. Small employers in rural areas may be particularly reluctant to release staff for training, given that long travel times to training providers will increase the time away from the business and there is no central funding to cover these additional costs. Some of the funding criteria set, such as minimum class sizes and the need for public-funded courses to lead to a specified NVQ qualification, may also be inappropriate in rural areas. Implementation of the Skills for Life strategy needs to be adapted to the needs of rural areas. This could include financial support to allow small and micro employers to release employees, covering both the time needed for training and the associated travel time, assistance with transport for employees, flexibility on minimum numbers and support and advice on training needs.

Priority 6: Supporting access to childcare

The lack of available childcare in rural areas is one of the key barriers to taking up employment and training, particularly for parents with low skills who may need to gain new skills or who may only be able to access low paid jobs. Evidence suggests that low-income parents living in rural areas have not benefited sufficiently from expanded childcare provision under the current target of free entitlement to nursery education for three and four-year olds. Even where childcare is available, if a parent has to travel some distance to access it and then travel somewhere else to work or train, the availability of 15 hours free childcare a week is unlikely to be sufficient to allow someone to take up employment. Increased provision for older children relies in part on the availability of extended schools' services and these are currently less likely to be provided in rural areas. Childcare needs to be provided sufficiently locally and flexibly to meet the needs of rural areas and this could be recognised more in the

implementation of the childcare strategy. For example, rural parents may prefer more hours of provision, for which they are charged a small fee, instead of fewer free hours.

Priority 7: Improving financial inclusion

Around 5% of households in rural districts do not have a bank or building society account. People without bank accounts are likely to lack affordable credit, pay higher rates of interest and be unable to take advantage of incentives available for paying bills by direct debit. Some current account holders can withdraw cash free of charge at post office branches, although not all banks provide this facility, forcing some people either to travel some distance or to use fee-charging cash machines to access their money. One way forward might be to support the development of credit unions in rural areas to provide access to affordable credit and banking services more generally. Research has identified a number of issues which are deterring the wider introduction of credit unions in rural areas which would need addressing. These include: the more diverse nature of the rural population, the scarcity of the types of large employers around which many urban credit unions are based and that existing legislation may not always be flexible enough to allow them to adapt to differing circumstances in rural areas.

Tackling access poverty

Priority 8: Reducing the costs of travel

Public transport costs are often higher in rural areas and people often have to travel further to services and other opportunities. Helping to reduce the costs of travel for people on low incomes could be considered. Local authorities have recently been given funding to provide free local bus travel for everybody over 60. One solution might involve the more widespread use of subsidising travel for other low income or at-risk groups. This need not be restricted to bus services and flexibility would be required for local authorities to provide concessionary travel in the most appropriate way for their area (eg taxi vouchers where there are limited bus services). Service providers can also help directly by reducing the need for people to travel, through the provision of mobile and other outreach services.

Priority 9: Providing alternative transport for people who do not have their own

Along with reducing the cost for users of transport, there is a need to provide forms of transport that are tailored to people's needs. Wheels to Work is one successful example introduced in recent years and this, and other schemes, have been funded through the Rural Transport Partnership (RTP) initiative. This funding stream, and the Rural Bus Challenge (RBC), are now coming to an end and many schemes funded through these are, therefore, unlikely to continue. Funding needs to be made available to allow local authorities to maintain existing levels of rural transport provision and to allow them to develop further solutions to people's travel needs.

Priority 10: Ensuring that some rural people aren't left behind as ICT develops

Tackling the digital divide will become increasingly important. As technology develops and becomes much more portable and personal, access to ICT in public places for those without their own form of computer or Internet access will be stigmatising and unlikely to be seen as a standard of 'normal' everyday life. Many groups, such as older people, may need support and training to familiarize themselves with

using new ICT. More mainstream solutions are required to provide home ICT access in rural areas. The roll out of Digital TV provides an opportunity to provide internet access for all in their own homes, given the widespread ownership of TVs. Further effort is required to ensure that no-one in rural areas is left out of the process of digital switchover. This requires increasing people's knowledge of the potential of Digital TV, their capacity to use it and their ability to afford it. Consideration also needs to be given to alternatives to ensure those unable to have their own fixed TV or computer (such as perhaps migrant workers or those without a permanent home or site) do not become marginalized.

Tackling network poverty

Priority 11: Retaining local meeting and service places

There has been a loss of local venues for people to use for formal social activities (such as village halls for social events and pubs) and a loss of local service places (such as village shops and post offices), where people meet on an informal basis as part of going about their everyday lives. The research indicates that this is a particular problem in smaller rural communities. Although policy has recognised the role a local meeting place can play in promoting community cohesion and social capital, there is a need for more support to help retain local physical meeting places. This could include encouraging multi-service outlets and joint location to provide a range of services from one place, along with wider use of existing places (such as extension of schools for use by the whole community or a room in the local pub for use as a community meeting space). These are not necessarily new ideas, but need greater encouragement and more emphasis.

Priority 12: Promoting informal social support

Rural communities do not always live up to the idyllic image of support and care and the voluntary sector does not, and cannot, always fill the gap. Research indicates the need for solutions in rural areas that rely on a reciprocal approach in more informal one-to-one support, to overcome the rural culture of stoicism and perceived stigma of asking for help without being able to offer anything in return. There needs to be further promotion of initiatives to provide informal support, rather than relying only on support agencies in the formal voluntary sector. These could include approaches, such as time banks, which provide opportunities for people to perform tasks for others, in return for credits to spend on the services of other people.

Priority 13: Increasing the 'disadvantage voice' locally

The lack of opportunity for some rural residents to influence decisions affecting their daily lives may result in inappropriate local priorities or decisions. Little information exists on who is engaged and involved in rural local decision making and whether the voice of disadvantaged or minority groups is captured. Some limited research suggests a lack of membership in local organisations by less affluent and 'hard to reach' groups that traditionally might not get involved. Our new attitudes survey also suggests that those who are potentially most at risk of disadvantage are the least likely to have taken action locally to address a problem. There is a need to ensure all rural people have a proper say about their local area. Opportunities to promote inclusive communities, enabling local communities and organisations to support the integration of all people and acceptance of those experiencing disadvantage, include

the Quality Parish and Town Council scheme and Defra's new Rural Social and Community Programme.

Places:

actions to help improve local opportunities more generally

Priority 14: Improving the quality of employment available

Given the seasonal, part-time and low wages of much rural employment, combined with a lower choice of jobs, particularly in peripheral areas, there is a need to encourage business development in rural areas that provides good quality opportunities for all rural residents. One way of achieving this is through the establishment of more, smaller enterprises in rural areas and providing better support for enterprise that brings beneficial social impacts, such as better quality employment and levels of pay. Currently, government economic priorities focus on raising productivity. This has a tendency to focus business advice and funding on firms with high employment growth and innovation potential, rather than supporting enterprises that could provide a smaller number of jobs or opportunities for improvements for existing employees. Higher priority needs to be given to establishing and developing enterprises in rural areas, by recognising the contribution different types of business and business success can make in tackling disadvantage.

Priority 15: Increasing the supply of affordable housing

Housing shortages and high prices are critical and the lack of affordable housing for groups who cannot afford to rent or buy in rural areas is well documented. A lack of affordable housing in some areas now extends to those on average incomes, not just people on lower incomes. It is leading to people moving out of rural areas and increasing concerns about the sustainability of rural communities. Our recent advice to the Government's Affordable Rural Housing Commission recommended a four strand approach: more effective rural proofing of housing policies at all levels; a real increase in, and targeting of, resources to meet rural needs for affordable housing; flexible planning policies to allow villages to grow and adapt; and empowering local communities to be involved in shaping their own solutions.

Priority 16: Increasing transport provision and accessibility

Accessibility planning through Local Transport Plans has the potential to play an important role in addressing rural disadvantage by improving transport provision and access to services, but it must be applied in rural areas in a way which addresses the full range of journey needs. This includes recognising the importance of travel for employment, social and leisure purposes, as well as other journey purposes whereas most of the focus of accessibility planning to date has been on access to services, such as education and healthcare. This can be a particular problem in rural areas, where there is often little or no public transport at the times people wish to travel, such as weekends and evenings. In addition, changing patterns in the provision of services and the trend towards fewer but larger facilities have resulted in many rural people having to travel further to access them. In general, the service user bears the increased costs of travelling, rather than the service provider contributing towards the cost, which impacts disproportionately on those with low incomes or lacking their own transport. One solution might be for public service providers to contribute to the local authority funding for

transport to allow access to their service in an integrated network, when making decisions about the best location (or relocation) of their service.

Perceptions:

actions to change attitudes and culture that lead to rural disadvantage being hidden or ignored

Priority 17: Challenging the myth of the rural idyll

There is inadequate awareness by policy makers, service providers and the public at large of the existence of rural disadvantage. Our recent survey shows that many people are unaware that rural disadvantage exists or the scale of the problem. It is likely that many do not consider the impact of their actions, including for example the effect of local objections and resistance to socially beneficial developments (for example the well documented NIMBY). A public awareness campaign is required to convince people that disadvantage exists in rural areas. This could be run alongside a wider national strategy to address some of the common misconceptions about disadvantage, such as breaking the link perceived by many between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' people, disadvantage and lack of individual effort.

Priority 18: Tackling the stigma of rural disadvantage

It is clear that many people do not seek support because they, or others in the local community, see asking for help, either financial or in other ways, as being shameful. Rural evidence on this includes the underreporting of mental health problems and the low take-up of fuel poverty grants, as well as our attitudinal survey. Again, stigma is not only associated with rural, rather than urban, disadvantage, but seems to be more prevalent and is hindered by the visibility of receiving support in rural communities. A greater emphasis is needed by service providers in considering how to overcome the stigma of receiving support. Multi-service outlets, drop-in centres and joint provision offer one way forward since they can provide anonymity and overcome visibility. Local communities and organisations could also play a valuable role in emphasising people's rights and removing the stigma of receiving support.

Processes:

actions to ensure policy is designed and implemented in a way that meets rural needs.

Priority 19: Reflecting rurality in resource allocations

Underlying many of the challenges facing disadvantaged people within rural communities is their access to services. Service providers frequently do not deliver the same quality and level of services to rural areas as they do in other areas. This is partly because it costs more to deliver to rural communities and because resource allocation formulae for rural service provision seem to be treated differently in different policy areas or organisations, so do not always adequately reflect these additional costs. For example, a weighting for sparsity is included in some parts of the finance for local government, yet there seems to be little allowance for rurality in health funding. In other cases, there has been discrete (but not necessarily ring fenced) funding for the additional costs of service provision in rural areas, such as the Rural Policing Fund. There is no account taken of the additional costs that settlement size or remoteness

might incur in funding formulae. Rural service providers require an equitable allocation of resources to enable them to deliver effectively and we recommend that there is a review of rurality in resource allocations as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007.

Priority 20: Consideration of rural disadvantage in all stages of policy

Whilst there is a commitment for all policies to be 'rural proofed', the lack of information about rural disadvantage in government research programmes and in assessments of how policy is working in tackling rural disadvantage suggests that consideration is not being given to rural issues (and particularly rural disadvantage) at all stages of policy processes. Rural issues, and specifically rural disadvantage, need to be considered routinely at all stages of policy making and delivery, rather than as something that only needs to be considered in part of the policy design stage. This means better rural proofing by government departments and consideration of rural impacts by scrutiny bodies.

Priority 21: Rural disadvantage reflected in national priorities and PSA targets

Rural disadvantage cuts across a range of government objectives, targets and delivery programmes. However, there is no monitoring of these policies in Public Service Agreement (PSA) reporting procedures to show how these are delivering in rural areas, nor any set targets to ensure rural areas benefit at the same pace as achievements made elsewhere. There is a need for the recognition of rural disadvantage in national priorities (currently through PSAs) designed to deliver mainstream programmes, together with adequate monitoring tools. The forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review provides an opportunity to build in ways of tackling rural disadvantage more clearly and accountably into departmental priorities and national performance monitoring frameworks. The existing PSA4 to tackle rural disadvantage should be developed, so that it is a joint target between Defra and other government departments who are responsible for delivering those policies, in order to secure commitment and better accountability for progress against the target.

Priority 22: Target people and not places

Perhaps one of the central challenges is that of targeting, given competing priorities for action and resources. The area-based approach of targeting programmes to tackle disadvantage in concentrated spatial areas does not capture the nature of rural disadvantage, where people experiencing disadvantage are scattered. There is an on-going debate about the effectiveness of area based approaches, but it is clear that there is a need for policies and associated targets that focus on people rather than place, wherever they live (be it urban or rural areas), as this will address rural disadvantage more effectively.

Priority 23: Set minimum standards

As well as PSAs, there are many other targets that drive policy and delivery. Targets can provide a disincentive to deliver in rural areas, given that it is usually easier to reach a target in centres of population. As well as targeting people rather than places, targets need to ensure rural, as well as urban, delivery and the establishment of minimum standards seem to offer the most potential here. Minimum standards would apply to all the population, wherever they live. Monitoring and measurement of targets should apply the new rural/urban definition, especially given apparent differences in disadvantage with sparsity and settlement size.

Summary of priorities for action

Action to tackle rural disadvantage is required on 4 levels:

People:

actions to help individuals overcome their disadvantage

Tackling financial poverty

1. Ensuring people take up benefits they are entitled to
2. Ensuring employees benefit from the National Minimum Wage
3. Ensuring support for unemployed people is tailored to the needs of those who work only intermittently or seasonally
4. Helping people with limiting long-term illnesses and disabilities into work
5. Ensuring people's skills and training needs are met
6. Supporting access to childcare
7. Improving financial inclusion

Tackling access poverty

8. Reducing the costs of travel
9. Providing alternative transport for people who do not have their own
10. Ensuring that some rural people aren't left behind as ICT develops

Tackling network poverty

11. Retaining local meeting and service places
12. Promoting informal social support
13. Increasing the 'disadvantage voice' locally

Places:

actions to help improve local opportunities more generally

14. Improving the quality of employment available
15. Increasing the supply of affordable housing
16. Increasing transport provision and accessibility

Perceptions:

actions to change attitudes and culture that lead to rural disadvantage being hidden

17. Challenging the myth of the rural idyll
18. Tackling the stigma of rural disadvantage

Processes:

actions to ensure policy is designed and implemented that meets rural needs

19. Reflecting rurality in resource allocations
 20. Consideration of rural disadvantage in all stages of policy
 21. Rural disadvantage is reflected in national priorities and PSA targets
 22. Target people and not places
 23. Set minimum standards
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