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Discussion: Sustainable rural communities

5.1 Key themes

Readers of the *State of the countryside 2007* will see a range of themes running through the report. There are three initial themes that we would like to highlight - change, equity, and rural/urban linkages.



i) Change:

Rural England continues to experience significant social, economic and environmental change. In some cases these changes mirror what is happening in urban areas, in others there are clearly distinct rural patterns. Key changes highlighted in this report include:

- The ongoing net inward migration to rural areas (largely from urban England).
- The ongoing demographic change which is producing a rural population that is older and that is ageing faster than the urban population.
- The increasing number of migrant workers in rural areas, who are not just working in agriculture but in a wide range of sectors such as tourism, manufacturing and public services.
- The continuing reduction in the number of physical service outlets – both private (e.g. petrol stations) and public. This in turn has reduced the overall levels of services availability and accessibility for rural people.
- The steady decline in the level of the UK's self-sufficiency in food and broader moves to land stewardship rather than food production.
- The change in land use – with notable increases in the proportion of land used for bio-fuels and for other sources of renewable energy production such as wind power.

ii) Equity:

Across a range of social and economic indicators, rural areas do very well – often demonstrating much better average outcomes in terms of health and wealth than are seen in urban England. However, within this, there remain key equity issues, including:

- The clear inequities in the housing market – essentially between those who can afford to acquire rural housing and those who cannot.
- The inequities in, and as a result of, transport. Car use is currently critical in rural areas for accessing services and to meet wider social needs. Hence those without access to cars are significantly disadvantaged as are many low income households who need a level of car ownership far in excess of that of their urban counterparts.
- Wider inequity between those in the rural 'mainstream' and those experiencing disadvantage for a range of reasons. The proportions of those in need can be lower in rural areas. However they remain harder to reach than is often the case in urban areas, as they tend to be highly geographically dispersed.

A critical over-arching equity issue is the difference in outcomes experienced between the less sparse (often central) rural areas and the sparsely populated (often peripheral) areas which experience worse performance over a range of indicators, for example household income and health.

iii) Rural /urban linkages:

This report focuses, correctly, on the specifics of life in rural England. However the analysis indicates, inescapably, the extent to which the conditions and changes in rural England are intrinsically linked to conditions and changes in urban England (and in the wider world). For example:

- Rural housing affordability is strongly affected by urban demand.
- Rural household incomes are influenced by the scale and nature of commuting to and from urban areas.
- The overall rural economy is highly integrated within the wider national and international economy with rural businesses tending to have much broader markets than their urban counterparts. Hence their economic viability is often dependent on external demand.

In summary, as this report outlines, rural England presents a complex picture of ongoing change, some key inequities and a high degree of linkage to urban areas.



5.2 Sustainable rural communities

Given this complex picture, it is challenging to produce an overall assessment of the extent to which rural England and rural communities are sustainable or, more importantly, about how they can become more sustainable.

Yet these are critical questions that need to be addressed – in particular within the context of the ongoing challenges faced by us all in responding to climate change. In simple numerical terms, rural England is a 'minor player' in that it comprises 19% of England's population, with England in turn containing less than 1% of the world's population (and producing around 2% of the world's carbon emissions). Nevertheless it is important both that rural England 'plays its part' in efforts to respond to climate change and that such efforts recognise its different characteristics (and opportunities).

This brings us back to sustainability – the extent to which we are able to keep things going into the future – which requires us to consider the full spectrum of social, economic and environmental issues. While the challenge of climate change concentrates the mind on the environmental dimension, social and economic coherence are also essential. Policies to ameliorate climate change need to contribute to the development of communities that are sustainable in all these ways.



Social, economic and environmental sustainability

In one sense communities are sustainable until they are not sustainable – when what is being done cannot carry on indefinitely. Most definitions of sustainability also embed the concept that we should hand on to our children a world that is at least as liveable in as the one we have.

Social, economic and environmental sustainability all imply different geographic levels of wellbeing.

- A socially sustainable community is largely dependent on people at the local level interacting with each other in a way that maintains stability. This does not have to mean that everybody interacts with all others well, but that there is not serious conflict. Local factors are critical here.
- An economically sustainable community is more dependent on wider economic health, coupled with more local factors, which determine the local economy. Hence national, regional (and sub- regional) factors are key.
- An environmentally sustainable community is more dependent on global environmental wellbeing. Climate change cannot be halted by the action of individual communities alone – we will all be affected. But some aspects can be local – for example pollution.

A trading off or a holistic approach?

The above are simplifications but point to the need for action at all geographic levels and across the social, economic and environmental spheres, if we are to maintain and develop sustainable rural communities at a time when policies to tackle climate change are being considered.

In the past sustainability tended to be thought of in terms of making sacrifices in one sphere of life in order to sustain others – now it is increasingly realised that policy needs to tackle the major issues of climate change while enhancing economies and social aspects.

How do rural areas currently measure up?

In terms of a wide range of social, economic and environmental quality measures, rural England is doing well in comparison to many urban areas, although, as we have noted previously, there are a number of key equity issues.

In terms of the central challenge of reducing carbon emissions, our understanding of the contribution of local geographical areas continues to develop. The evidence we have analysed in this report indicates relatively small overall differences between rural and urban areas, in terms of their carbon emissions per head, with regional and relative affluence patterns being more significant. Nevertheless in specific sectors there are challenges for rural areas – for example because rural houses tend to be older than urban houses and are consequently often harder to heat efficiently and because rural settlement patterns (and service locations) also generate more demand for travel which is less easy to satisfy with public transport solutions.

5.3 Looking forward

As a result of the recognition of the challenges of climate change, a range of policies have been debated – primarily with the objective of mitigating climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. These include:

- road pricing;
- increased energy efficiency in vehicles;
- increased energy efficiency in buildings;
- investment in renewable energy sources;
- re-investing in nuclear energy;
- increasing the 'carbon sink';
- land use planning; and
- lifestyle/behaviour change.

It is not the purpose of this report to provide a detailed assessment of the impacts of these potential policies – either individually or collectively. The key point to make is that, as the *State of the countryside* demonstrates, although there are now strong rural/urban commonalities and linkages, there remain some key differences in the social, economic and environmental characteristics of rural England. These different characteristics mean that the implementation of specific policies related to climate change will bring both valuable opportunities to rural England and will also bring challenges. Careful rural proofing of policy will be needed.

As an example, road pricing has recently been proposed as a tool to tackle climate change, rather than, or as well as congestion. Current suggestions imply higher pricing in urban areas and lower pricing in rural areas to cut congestion. But this could have an effect of encouraging further traffic growth in rural areas, and further migration to rural areas by people who would be likely to commute long distances, which could act against the climate change objectives.



At the heart of many of the opportunities lies the value and potential of the rural land - providing a carbon sink, a source of renewable fuels, as well as (more controversially) providing the current and potential location for nuclear power generation. Opportunities also lie in the strong social capital apparent in rural communities that provides the foundation for a locally based and owned response.

Some of the challenges, lie, as they do for the country as a whole, in behaviour change – for example around transport. Clearly in this area, as in others, there is a risk of negative outcomes (in particular for the most disadvantaged in rural communities) if policies adopted at national level do not recognise specific rural circumstances and needs. Many of these needs relate to the basic facts of geography – settlement size and distance to other settlements are some of the key factors that differentiate rural from urban society.

However, it would seem that we will not move forward successfully by treating rural England as a stand-alone entity. We know that urban England and rural England are already highly interconnected. Hence a broad way forward on sustainability ought to recognise this and to be clear on how rural and urban areas ought to connect in order to increase broader sustainability where (amongst other needs):

urban England needs rural England for:

- food;
- leisure;
- a carbon sink;
- energy production - bio fuels, wind power;

and rural England needs urban England for:

- jobs;
- goods; and
- services that cannot be provided at the local level.

These inter-linkages point to the need for holistic development of policy measures, both in terms of the linkage between economic, social and environmental sustainability, but also respecting the connections between urban and rural England.