



IS THE COUNTRYSIDE SUSTAINABLE? - STATE OF THE COUNTYSIDE 2006 REPORT

The Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) today published the 2006 State of the Countryside report giving the latest definitive picture of rural England. The report shows that last year over 105,000 people moved from urban to rural areas, continuing a pattern of urban to rural migration that has major consequences for the future of the countryside. The report also shows rural house prices rises again outstripping urban, the number of low income households growing, the numbers of key rural services reducing and stress levels among farmers going up significantly.

Launching the report Dr Stuart Burgess, the Prime Ministers Rural Advocate, stated: "While immigration into this country has received a lot of national media coverage, migration to the country has received less attention. This trend is part of a wider set of changes that is radically altering the lives of rural people, particularly those on low incomes. Looking to the future it is clear that we now need an active debate about how we can ensure that our rural communities are both diverse and sustainable."

"The report shows that the large movement of urban people to rural England is unlikely to be a temporary phenomenon as it is based on a deeply held attachment to the rural 'idyll'. When asked people, wherever they currently live, state a clear preference for life in smaller rural communities. To date, I do not believe that government has fully thought through the consequences of this mass inward migration. Yet we see its impacts across rural England, most critically in the housing market where house prices are increasingly being driven way beyond the reach of many locals, particularly young people and those on low incomes. At the same time, within our hamlets, villages and rural towns, the numbers of key services such as petrol stations continue to decline and the future of the rural post office network remains uncertain."

"As the report outlines, many rural areas still lag behind urban England. The proportion of low income households in the most sparsely populated areas has increased from 26% to 30% and the gap between wages in the most urban and the most rural areas now averages £130 per week. Nevertheless many local rural economies are strong and resilient, with more rural people choosing to be self employed or to work at home to get a better quality of life."

"Within this overall picture, it is important to emphasize the key changes affecting the farming sector. Due to the seismic changes going on in the industry and not least because of the delays in delivering the new single farm payment, stress levels in farmers have reached a record high.

The report also demonstrates that the way in which farmers choose to manage the land is changing with longer-term consequences for us all.”

“In terms of the wider environmental picture climate change is likely to lead in future to dramatic changes to both the countryside and rural living. Rural areas do face specific challenges, not least in terms of their reliance on the car. However, they also offer opportunities to develop our broader approaches to sustainability – based on active and engaged local communities and on the key potential of the land, for example to develop clean renewable forms of energy such as bio fuels.”

“The report highlights critical challenges for government – such as the need to respond to the central challenge of rural housing and the need to address the difficulties facing the less well off in our rural communities. It also starts a necessary debate about sustainability that everyone needs to engage in. Now, more than ever, we need to find approaches that increase the sustainability of our rural communities”.

The State of the Countryside report provides a unique examination of how rural England is changing and tracks social, economic and environmental change across the countryside. It provides a critical insight into what is happening in rural communities and shows trends and challenges that are often masked by conditions in the 80% of England that is urban.

The State of the Countryside is the first report since Parliament established the CRC as an independent body under the NERC Act 2006. It is one of the central ways that the CRC will deliver its role as an Independent Watchdog and complements its other roles as Rural Advocate and Expert Adviser. The report is available from 19 July.

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To view the State of the Countryside 2006 report, please visit www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk.
To order a hard copy (cost of £10) please telephone The Countryside Agency publications order line on 0870 120 6466.

STATE OF THE COUNTRYSIDE 2006: KEY FACTS

1. RURAL ENGLAND IN EVIDENCE

- At the time of the 2001 Census, there were 9.51 million people living in rural England.
- Of these 600,000 were found in the sparsely populated areas
- The Regions with the highest proportions of rural residents are the South West (34.1%) and the East of England (31%).

2. LIVING IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

- In 2003/4, predominantly rural districts/authorities experienced a net inward migration of 105,000 people; in 2000/1, the equivalent figure was 80,000.

- The 25-year projection for the population growth in the most rural districts/authorities is over 18%; the equivalent urban growth is 6-9%.
- In 2002, over 40% of house purchases in the sparsely populated rural areas were for cash.
- Between 2003 and 2005, the number of housing completions in the most rural districts/authorities fell by 4%; in the equivalent period, the number of housing completions in the most urban districts/authorities increased by 28%.
- In 2005, the average house price in rural hamlets was approximately twice that seen in urban settlements.
- Between 2000 and 2005, the sparsely populated rural areas experienced higher price rises than the rest of the country – with prices more than doubling.
- Across England as a whole, 47% of cash points are fee-paying; in rural villages 85% of cash points are fee-paying.
- The rate of male suicides (aged 16-24) in rural districts/authorities is currently almost 50% greater than that found in urban districts/authorities.
- The average cost (per head) of out of hours health cover in the most rural districts/authorities is 74% greater than that in the most urban areas.
- The proportion of people in hamlets experiencing power cuts is more than twice that found in urban areas; the proportion experiencing telephone service interruptions is two and a half times that in urban areas.
- People in rural hamlets and villages travel almost twice as far each year by car than do residents of urban areas.
- Between 1999 and 2004, traffic flows on rural roads increased by more than was the case on urban roads; for rural trunk/principal roads, the percentage increase was eleven times that experienced on equivalent urban roads.
- In the hamlets and villages of rural England, 38-48% of people have been recently involved in a local organisation; in the main urban settlements, the equivalent figure is 26%.
- In the hamlets of England, 76% of people voted in the last general election; in urban areas, the figure was 64%.
- Between 2001/2 and 2004/5 (according to the British Crime Survey), violent crime fell by 24% in rural villages and hamlets, by 15% in rural towns and by 14% in urban settlements.

3. ECONOMIC HEALTH

- In the villages and hamlets in the less sparsely populated areas of England, median household income is £32,000 to £34,000; in the villages and hamlets within the sparsely populated areas, median income is £25,000 to £26,000.
- Between 2004 and 2006, the proportion of households in the rural sparsely populated areas that had low income (i.e. less than £15,861 - 60% of the English median) increased from 26% to 30%. In total, there are over 900,000 low income rural households.
- The gap in average weekly pay between the most rural and the most urban areas has increased over recent years and, in 2005, was £130.
- In the sparsely populated areas of England, around one quarter of all residents receive the state pension.
- In 2005, working age unemployment in the most rural districts/authorities was 3.2%; in the most urban areas, the equivalent figure was 6.2%.
- Self-employment in rural hamlets and villages is two to three times more frequent than in the main urban areas.
- Home-working is more prevalent in rural areas. At the time of the 2001 Census, 881,000 rural people (16% of the economically active population) were classified as home-workers.
- In the most rural districts/authorities, there are over 700 businesses per 10,000 people of working age; in the most urban districts, the equivalent figure is under 500.
- In predominantly rural districts/authorities, the number of manufacturing businesses has grown over the last decade; in urban areas, the number has fallen.
- Overall, in the last year for which we have information, the number of businesses in the most rural districts/authorities actually fell; the only other category experiencing a loss of businesses were major urban areas.

4. LAND AND ENVIRONMENT

- Agriculture uses 74% of England's land area.
- Over the last five years, the area of grassland has increased by 8%; in the same period, cattle numbers have fallen by 8%, sheep by 17% and pigs by 22%.
- One quarter of farm businesses have negative net farm income – an increase of 7 per cent over

last year.

- In 2005, the total labour force on farms was 370,000 – of whom 44% worked on a full-time basis.
- In the first three months of 2006, the number of calls to the Farm Crisis Network helpline increased by 65% over the same period the previous year.
- UK farming now provides around three quarters of the indigenous food consumed in the UK and around 60% of all food consumed.
- Forestry now occupies 8.4% of England's land area.
- A total of 935,681 hectares (7% of England's land) has now been mapped as open country or registered common land – and is now available for open access from the public.
- 2005 saw the addition of eight new windfarms, providing energy capable of supplying a further 22,000 homes.

5. The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act establishes the Commission for Rural Communities as an independent statutory body with three main roles:

Rural advocate: the voice for rural people, businesses and communities.

Expert adviser: providing evidence-based, independent advice to government and others.

Independent watchdog: monitoring and reporting on the formulation and delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

Until 1 October 2006 the Commission will continue to operate as a distinct division of the Countryside Agency.