Living in the countryside

Rural disadvantage and rural regeneration

Written by Mandy Gloyer

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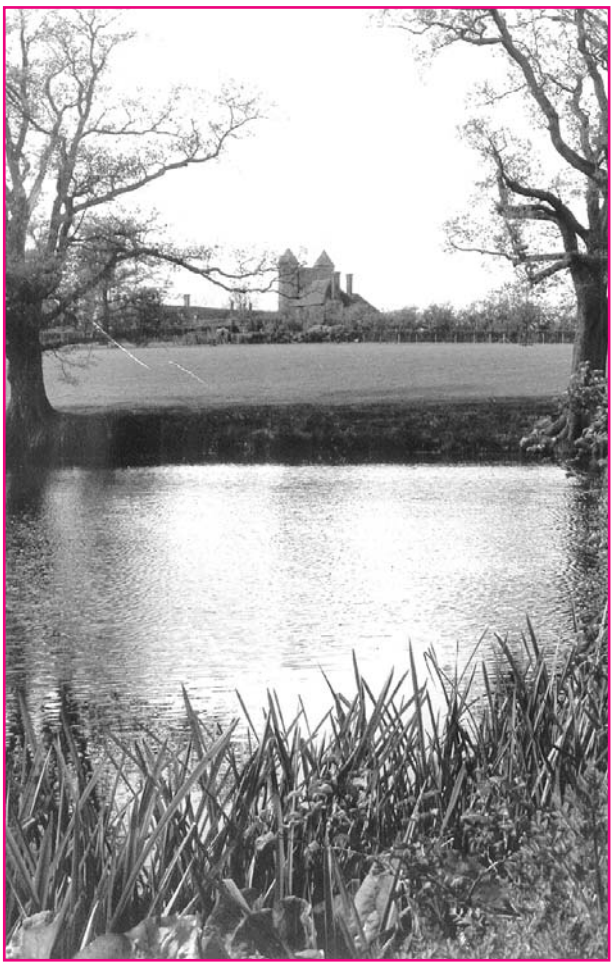
Introduction

The rural agenda in England is now more politically prominent than it has been for many years. The production of the Rural White Paper in November 2000, the creation of the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in June 2001, and the appointment of a national rural advocate to oversee the 'rural-proofing' of government policy across all departments are all testament to the rise in importance of rural issues. The recent establishment of national and regional Rural Affairs Forums to oversee and take forward the commitments within the Rural White Paper is further evidence. The national movement towards recognition of the need for rural development can be contextualised against moves within Europe towards more integrated rural social, economic and environmental development. But what is so different about the 'rural' and why does it merit this attention?



The rural idyll: masking deprivation?

Many aspects of life in rural areas are different from those that exist in urban and semi-urban spaces. Living in the countryside has its advantages, and 91 per cent of people in Britain believe it to be a healthier environment to live in.[1] Quality of life issues influence people to believe that life in rural areas can be somehow idyllic, and have, in part, been responsible for the outward migration from Britain's towns and cities into the countryside. The counter-urban shift in population that has been evident in the UK in the last few decades may be showing some signs of abating but Britain's rural areas continue to gain population faster than metropolitan and industrial areas.[2] The reality of life for many rural dwellers, however, belies this 'rural idyll' of popular perception.

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Written by Mandy Gloyer
Rural Development Adviser
National Farmers Union
Agriculture House
164 Shaftesbury Avenue
London WC2H 8HL

Tel: 020 7331 7345
Fax: 020 7331 7625
Email: mandy.gloyer@nfu.org.uk
Web: www.nfu.org.uk

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Editor: Pauline Sturges
Tel: 01736 786093
Email: *paulinesturges@onetel.net.uk*

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Rural disadvantage

The countryside is often perceived to be more prosperous than many urban areas, and traditionally, deprivation has been defined in very urban-centric terms. Certainly, taken at face value, household incomes are higher, and unemployment is lower in rural areas. It has only been relatively recently that the nature of rural deprivation has been considered and addressed.

Rural disadvantage tends to be more dispersed and fragmented than is the case in Britain's towns and cities, where distinct areas of relative deprivation can often be identified. The rural poor commonly live in close proximity to their more affluent neighbours, in contrast to the urban situation, where there is more of a tendency for concentrated disadvantage. This makes it harder to identify, measure, and therefore target for improvement: 'There is hidden poverty in pockets in rural areas but its extent is unknown'.[3] Disadvantage in rural areas can also be defined in very different terms from urban, with, for example, poor access to shops and services combined with few transport options, making life very difficult for disadvantaged groups.

Measurement

Indicators that are used to allocate resources (such as through local authority Standard Spending Assessments (SSAs), and health authority funding) and to target programmes, like the Single Regeneration Budget and EU Structural Funds, have tended to highlight urban disadvantage at the expense of rural. The indicators specified by DTLR for the 2002/3 SSAs, for example, include such things as a country of birth indicator, as well as indicators for children living in flats, and those living in public sector rented accommodation. Car ownership is also often taken as a measure of prosperity, although not in this particular case. All of these are features of urban rather than rural deprivation. There is a far lower proportion of the rural population that have a country of birth outside of Britain, few people live in flats, and the proportion of public sector accommodation is low. Car ownership is higher in rural areas, of necessity, and the incidence of two and more cars per household is also higher. Use of private transport in areas where there is little or no public or community transport is crucial to get to work and access services, and is therefore not an adequate indicator of relative prosperity.

The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit's Action Plan to overcome disadvantage identifies and attempts to tackle so-called 'post-code poverty'. It does, however, rely on the use of the Indices of Deprivation 2000 to target its funding to the most deprived wards in England through the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. The revised ID2000 has six domains for identifying disadvantage at ward level, including health, education, access, housing income and employment. The problem is that, in rural areas, even ward level data will not detect some aspects of deprivation. Moreover, the nature of disadvantage in rural areas is significantly different enough that it fails to be adequately picked up by traditionally used indicators for such things as employment and housing.

Employment

Claimant count unemployment is commonly used as one measure of disadvantage. Yet rural areas show low rates of claimant count unemployment, and as such score as relatively advantaged compared to many urban areas. There are, however, some serious concerns about using this measure in the rural context. It masks the fact that the rural workforce is faced with a limited range of job opportunities, low pay, a higher proportion of part-time working, and seasonal employment. Although average household incomes in rural areas tend to be higher than urban incomes, this masks the fact that nearly a quarter of all rural households live below the poverty line.

This can be hidden for a number of reasons. More remote areas show a much higher incidence of lower incomes, due to more land-based and seasonal work. People with low incomes are also more scattered among the more affluent population, allowing averages, even for relatively small areas like wards, to hide those polarised towards the lower end of the income spectrum. And despite the higher average household incomes that are detected, average wages are only 88 per cent of those in urban areas. Households which depend on an individual wage, rather than other sources of income, are then worse off.

Another main reason to distrust claimant count unemployment as a measure is that it would appear that more unemployment in rural areas is 'hidden'. Responses to being out of work, and subsequent benefit status may not reflect the real reasons why people are not working, so some of those who would register as unemployed elsewhere would class themselves as 'early retired' or 'long-term sick' in rural areas. This may be because of the stigma that can still exist in smaller communities about being unemployed. The actual extent of hidden unemployment is still unknown. However, it has been argued that the extent of unemployment in rural areas of priority need 'is well in excess of the official figures, and many of those who would like to work, but are excluded from these figures, should be included in assessments of the rural unemployment problem'.[4]

Housing

The composition of the housing stock in rural areas is different from that in urban areas. There is much higher owner-occupation and private renting, and only 14 per cent of rural housing is public or social rented, compared to 23 per cent in urban areas.[5] The proportion of the population in social rented housing is, therefore, misleading as a measure of disadvantage in rural areas, as the housing stock is differently constituted.

Housing markets in rural areas have also been skewed by the inward movement of new, often more affluent, residents and, in some areas, second home owners. There is a shortage of affordable housing in many rural areas, and local residents may be priced out of the housing market, especially younger people seeking their first home. If mortgage costs are examined as a percentage of income (both figures averaged), it is apparent that rural areas are worse off

in these terms, with costs of 48 per cent of income, compared to urban areas, where costs are 38 per cent (there are, of course, regional variations).[6] With a lack of social rented housing, exacerbated by the Right to Buy, and higher prices for owner-occupiers, many rural residents, especially those seeking a first home, are disadvantaged. This would not, however, be picked up by a measure focusing on the proportion of population in social rented accommodation.

Homelessness

As rural deprivation is more difficult to detect and measure than that in urban areas, it is no surprise that rural homelessness is also more 'hidden'. A recent report by Centrepoint, the national charity for youth homelessness, identified a common perception that homelessness does not exist in rural areas at all, and that this is one of the biggest barriers facing young people experiencing it. Coping tactics vary from those in urban areas, in that there are fewer 'rough sleepers' than are evident in towns and cities, but the rural homeless often resort to sleeping on friends' or relatives' floors, or 'in abandoned cars, tents, railway stations and empty houses'.[7] It is less visible, then, but rural homelessness is growing. As a proportion of the national total, it has increased in recent years from 11.8 per cent in 1992 to 14.4 per cent in 1996.[8]

Moreover, the experience of being homeless in rural areas is different, in that there are few services providing advice and information, and the distance to services and lack of transport options exacerbate this. There is also more of a stigma being homeless in a small community, and fewer networks, so the rural homeless are potentially more isolated than their urban counterparts.

Identifying rural indicators

The nature of disadvantage in rural areas is clearly different then, but what can be done to identify it, and target regeneration programmes appropriately? One hurdle is the availability of data, especially on income and employment, at small enough scales to identify the problems. Of course, identifying dispersed poverty in a small community leads to loss of anonymity, and would not be possible for most national data sets. Given the difficulties in getting an effective small scale measurement, the answer may be to examine the types of indicators that are used nationally, and challenge the most urban-centric of these. The Countryside Agency have investigated the use of 'bundles' of indicators that more accurately reflect the nature of rural disadvantage, although there are still some questions about how widely these more complicated measures would be used.[9] They are also currently working on agreeing a suite of rural indicators that can at least be used by government to 'rural proof' policies and programmes.

Rural regeneration

Clearly, the 'rural' is a very diverse concept, containing many gradations of remoteness and deprivation, along with variations in social, economic and environmental bases. The idea of 'rural regeneration' as a one-fits-all strategy is therefore not possible. Certain sectors and geographic areas, however, have been in urgent need of tailored regeneration strategies to meet their specific requirements.

Area-based regeneration

One way of targeting rural regeneration is through the identification of Rural Priority Areas (RPAs) in each region. Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) target according to both area-based and thematic priorities, and the operation of RPAs allows a focus for allocating resources to rural areas of most social and economic need. The areas identified were previously those outlined by the Rural Development Commission, on the basis of a number of socio-economic indicators derived from the Census and from local information. As such, they are more sensitive to picking up rural disadvantage than those used for such programmes as SRB. The problem of identifying dispersed rural poverty pocketed in more affluent areas is not, however, overcome by this or any other area-based approach. Many RDAs are currently reviewing their rural (and in some cases urban) prioritisation strategies.

In terms of geographically targeted programmes, the Structural Funds also provide examples of regeneration initiatives aimed at needy rural areas. The Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Objective 1 programme and the Objective 2 programmes for rural areas identify where targeted action is needed. The EU Community Initiative LEADER+ is a further example of area-targeted rural regeneration, although the areas in need effectively define themselves, through the formation of geographically homogeneous Local Action Group areas.

Area-based approaches that target priority areas have the advantage that they are straightforward to operate, and provided they effectively identify rural rather than urban issues, can draw in regeneration funding which then can be tailored to the specific needs of the area itself.

Sectoral and thematic regeneration

However, while rural disadvantage is harder to measure and identify, the delivery of regeneration tends to focus on the same issues as it would in urban areas. The provision of training, new business development with advice and support, job creation and service provision are all common needs, albeit different in detail. Most businesses in rural areas are micro-businesses, employing under ten people, for example, so have specific needs. These needs may, though, be similar to the needs of urban micro-businesses, and could benefit from being looked at in a less geographically targeted way.

As well as delivering funding through the identification of priority areas, RDAs operate programmes that benefit both rural and urban alike. By, for example, tailoring programmes to encourage business clusters to recognise the different sectors and sizes of rural businesses, a region-wide programme can benefit rural and urban businesses alike.

The Countryside Agency, with its specific remit for the environmental, social and economic development of

the countryside, has a suite of regeneration programmes targeted at rural areas. These are thematic in nature, rather than delivered at priority areas, and encompass support for transport schemes, Vital Villages, Market Towns.

As far as sectoral regeneration efforts go, the recent crisis in agriculture has highlighted the need for support. The average UK farmer earned just £10,000 for the financial year to February 2002, far below the minimum wage. With 60,000 farmers and farm workers losing their jobs in the three years to June 2001, and thousands more in the first six months of 2002, the strain on the rural economy is clear.[10] In the face of European and national moves to move towards integrated rural development rather than direct subsidy support for production, support for agriculture is changing. The reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), outlined in Agenda 2000, introduced the Rural Development Regulation (RDR), the so-called 'second pillar of CAP', where member states can move funds from production support to environmental and rural development measures.

The England Rural Development Programme (ERDP) is the six year programme for rural development and the environment resulting from the government's interpretation of the RDR. Similar programmes operate elsewhere in the UK and other EU member states. For the first time, rural development and environmental measures have been brought together in one programme, full details of which are available from DEFRA. The ERDP, and other countries' programmes, are due for mid-term review, and it is timely to explore how these are working in practice to deliver rural regeneration. Are there signs that they are delivering what they promise?

In fact, there has been very little evidence to date that the programme is as integrated as was envisaged. A hope for the programme was that there would be cross-over bids for grant funding across the environmental schemes, such as Countryside Stewardship, and the development schemes, such as the Rural Enterprise Scheme. For example, a project that combined environmental improvement with a farm tourism development, would be ideally placed to take advantage of the linkages that the programme hoped to create. There has as yet been no external audit of the programme as a whole, so the additional value that it delivers is hard to ascertain. Certainly, some of the new schemes within it are failing to encourage innovation, and are stifling some smaller scale projects, due to difficulties with lack of facilitation and the burdensome nature of the application process. The caveat that the programme's initial stages of operation were seriously hampered by the foot and mouth outbreak should be noted, although it is becoming clear that some of the schemes may be suffering from more than just teething troubles.

National and regional delivery of help to rural areas must also be backed up by what happens at the more local level. The Local Government Association (LGA) recently embarked on an inquiry into how local authorities can work best towards rural revival, and maximise partnership work in their area to this end. Their findings should be available towards the end of this year. Many rural authorities incorporate specifically rural programmes within their economic development strategies, but their role may frequently be in coordinating or creating partnerships at the local level to deliver advice, funding, facilitation and training solutions to rural regeneration problems. Rural partnership working was generally strengthened throughout the foot and mouth crisis, and it is vital that the impetus for this should not be lost, as a crisis-driven approach is not sustainable longer term. The growing role of Local Strategic Partnerships and the development of community strategies make this ever more important.

Conclusions

The nature of disadvantage and social exclusion in rural areas is different, although the end result may be the same for the individuals involved. Socially excluded households in rural areas are more scattered and harder to identify. Moreover, the manifestation of exclusion may be different (for example, rural housing problems have more to do with affordability than quality, and employment problems may centre more on low pay and seasonality than unemployment), and distance and isolation, as well as lack of access to jobs and services exacerbate problems for disadvantaged rural people.

Regeneration in rural areas is delivered through a number of channels and can either be geographically targeted at areas of defined need, or delivered horizontally through national, regional or sub-regional programmes, both methods with advantages and disadvantages. Despite some recent recognition that rural need is different, however, there remains a lot to be done to more effectively measure where and what it entails, and to move public bodies and others away from urban-centric prioritising indicators. It is too early to tell whether the Countryside Agency's remit to ensure policies and programmes are 'rural proofed' will resolve these problems, but there is a continued need for everyone involved in regeneration at all levels to recognise the rural as different.

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NOTE: Since the time of writing, figures attributed to the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions are now the responsibility of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.