Commission for Rural Communities
Tackling rural disadvantage

Rural Disadvantage: our first thematic study
This document, produced for the Countryside Agency’s launch of its Commission for Rural Communities division, provides a brief overview of the current evidence about rural disadvantage. It seeks views about the focus for the Commission’s first thematic study, which will be on the topic of rural disadvantage. A series of questions appear at the end of the document.

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What is rural disadvantage?

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Tackling Disadvantage: A 20 Year Enterprise, 2004) uses the following terms to describe disadvantage, social exclusion and poverty:

- ‘Disadvantage’ to signify 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.

- ‘Social exclusion’ to denote the processes which create disadvantage.

- ‘Poverty’ to signify a lack of resources that prevents individuals and households from reaching an adequate standard of living.

Academic understanding also notes the multi-dimensional nature of disadvantage and its links with the concepts of poverty and social exclusion (for example, Shucksmith 2003 and Policy responses to social exclusion, Open University Press, 2000). Many also see disadvantage as a challenge to social justice and it is notable that ‘Social Justice for All’ is a key objective in Defra’s Rural Strategy 2004.

In summary, disadvantage is not just about financial resources, but a range of factors that prevent a person participating fully in society. While low income may be a key characteristic, disadvantage also relates to other factors such as the affordability of housing, the availability of transport and the ability to access services. These issues are particularly important in rural areas.

Much of the evidence underlines the complex nature of rural disadvantage. Many aspects are similar to those found in urban areas and yet there can be aspects of rurality that lead to disadvantage (Rural proofing and best practice in neighbourhood renewal, the Countryside Agency, 2004). These issues are explored in this document.
What we know about rural disadvantage

Most of those who live in rural areas experience a high quality of life. The Countryside Agency’s *The State of the Countryside 2004* report showed that, on average, people in rural areas live longer and enjoy better health than city dwellers. Crime rates are lower in the countryside and some measures of business success are more positive.

Disadvantage, social exclusion and poverty have sometimes been perceived as essentially urban issues. Also, being disadvantaged in a rural area has sometimes been seen as less problematic, because the surrounding environment is better.

But there is plenty of evidence of disadvantage in rural communities and how this varies between different types of rural area. There are, for example, marked differences between communities in remote rural areas and those nearer to conurbations. There also appear to be differences between market towns, villages and more isolated households. Low incomes, educational deprivation, poor health and unemployment are more prevalent in remoter rural areas than in accessible (commutable) areas.
The scale of the problem

Research for the Countryside Agency, Defra, academic institutions, trusts and think tanks has sought to identify the scale and nature of rural disadvantage, and with some success. However, certain weaknesses in the evidence base are now being addressed by the arrival of new small area datasets and the publication in 2004 of a new rural definition, which is improving understanding and assisting the targeting of policies.

Poverty, unemployment and low pay

Measures of employment, income and earnings paint a complex picture in rural areas. Whilst average rural household incomes are above the national norm, average earnings (wages) in jobs located in rural areas are lower than the national norm and there is a large spread of incomes, with a slightly higher proportion of rural households on low incomes. However, rural adults are less likely to be unemployed or claiming benefits.

Key statistics about rural poverty and low income

23% of all rural households have a low income by the standard measure (less than 60% of the national average). For England as a whole the figure is also 23% (The State of the Countryside 2004).

Among low income households, rural areas have a high proportion (a quarter or roughly 600,000) aged over 60 (Indicators of poverty and social exclusion in rural England, the Countryside Agency, 2002).

23% of rural children (roughly 700,000) live in low income households (as above).

Low income households in rural areas are much more likely to be in work and more likely to be self-employed than those living elsewhere (The State of the Countryside 2004).

Low income households in rural areas find it difficult to move up the income scale. 67% of households on a low income in 1998 were still on a low income two years later. (Indicators of poverty and social exclusion in rural England, the Countryside Agency, 2002).

Average weekly earnings in 2003 were £404 for jobs in remote rural areas, £453 for those in accessible rural areas and £473 for those in urban areas (The State of the Countryside 2004).

Distribution of economic disadvantage

The Rural Evidence Research Centre (RERC) has been established at Birkbeck College to carry out evidence based work which will underpin the evaluation of existing policies and the development of new ones. Data presented in the following three figures, which is part of RERC’s on-going work, provides clear evidence of the complex distribution of economic disadvantage in rural areas.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of low income benefit recipients who live in more deprived and less deprived settlements. In urban areas the great majority of these benefit recipients (85%) live in the most deprived 50% of areas (using the Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2004). In rural towns just over half (58%) of these benefit recipients live in the most deprived 50% of areas. By contrast, in other rural
**Figure 1** Proportions of income-related benefit recipients classified by deprivation of area of residence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Least deprived</th>
<th>Most deprived</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban Areas</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Towns</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villages and Dispersed</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend: □ Most deprived □ Least deprived

**Figure 2** Example of complexity of economic disadvantage: distribution of lower income households in an area of Suffolk
areas – villages and dispersed settlements – only 26% live in the most deprived 50% of areas. In other words, those who are income disadvantaged mostly live in clusters in urban areas, whereas they are mostly scattered across rural areas.

Figure 2 presents disadvantage data in a different way and emphasises local complexity. The map of an area in Suffolk shows that there are small pockets or small areas of lower income households (average earning £14,200-£21,600 per year) and they are often in close proximity to areas of real affluence (average earning £39,300-£58,000 per year). Measuring disadvantage over too large an area would overlook these pockets and may underestimate the level of disadvantage. As Shucksmith has noted: “The hidden and dispersed nature of poverty in rural areas has often made rural poverty difficult to address through area-based schemes and local anti-poverty initiatives” (2000).

Nevertheless, as Figure 3 underlines, there are proportionately higher levels of economic disadvantage in some rural areas than in others. The map shows the percentage of rural households with low incomes – less than 60% of the national average. Greater proportions are found in certain rural areas, including the South West peninsula, North East England, around the Wash and in rural areas of South Yorkshire, Derbyshire and North Nottinghamshire.

**Housing**

Access to affordable housing, for rent and to buy, is a real issue for many people in rural areas. Pensioner households, young people and other first time buyers are particularly likely to be priced out of the market.

- Figure 4 (see overleaf) shows that the median house price in accessible rural districts, at the end of 2003, was around £160,000 – higher than in remote rural or urban areas *(The State of the Countryside 2004)*.

- This meant that 37% of rural residents would have had to spend over half of their income on mortgage payments on an average home. The comparable figure for urban areas is 25%.

- Evidence from Rural Housing Enabler surveys reveals that, of households indicating a need for affordable housing, only 15% (just over one in six) are registered on local authority or housing association waiting lists.

- In 2002-03 almost 24,000 rural households were accepted as homeless and in priority need – up by a quarter over three years *(The State of the Countryside 2004)*.
Figure 3  The percentage of households earning less than 60% of median household income
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**Figure 4** Average median house prices in England (£000s)

![Graph showing average median house prices in England](image)


**Figure 5** Average weekly household expenditure on transport as a percentage of average weekly household expenditure in rural and urban areas, Great Britain.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total average weekly household expenditure (£)</td>
<td>417.90</td>
<td>387.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average weekly household transport spending (£)</td>
<td>67.60</td>
<td>53.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport as a percentage total</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ONS, 2003

**Figure 6** Percentage of rural households within the set distances from key services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key services</th>
<th>Km</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>Decrease in Rural Service Outlets 2000-03</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banks &amp; building societies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Offices</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supermarkets</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary schools</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary schools</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GP surgeries</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>No change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cashpoints</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libraries</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: South East Regional research Laboratory, 2004
Transport
Public transport provision in rural areas is, of course, much lower than in urban areas. For the majority of car-owning households this is not a problem, but there are certain groups who are disadvantaged by this. Among the over 65s, 75% of single people and 28% of couples do not have a car (Age Concern). And low-income households can face difficulties, including the cost of running a car in the absence of an alternative.

• 15% of rural households do not own a car (The State of the Countryside 2004).

• Figure 5 shows that, on average, rural households spend £13.70 per week more on transport than urban households (The State of the Countryside 2004).

• Only 51% of people living in rural settlements live within walking distance of a bus stop with a regular daily service.

Services
Geographic proximity to, or distance from, services is often used as a proxy for rural accessibility to services. Inaccessibility of local services is often linked to disadvantage, because those with low incomes are less likely to have the resources to travel to healthcare and other services. Some older people face particular difficulties if there are not locally delivered services. Inaccessibility can also impact on the quality of life, for instance where extra time is spent travelling to or from services.

Trends in local service availability are mixed and often modest from year to year, but figures show a decline in some services (Figure 6). Older research and surveys show that decline has been a long term trend. Many factors affecting both service providers and customers have contributed.

“It is pretty lonely being a parent with a child like James. There is still quite a lot of people who are very prejudiced. I’d like to think that in time they would be able to integrate healthy children and handicapped children” (Sylvia, 29, two parent family, 3 children – two disabled, Lincs – Challenging the Rural Idyll, the Countryside Agency, 2000).
Attitudes to disadvantage

Some research has concluded that more traditional attitudes in rural areas about self-sufficiency and ‘making do’ can lead to disadvantage going undeclared or unheeded. Rural communities may also be perceived as more self-contained and mutually supportive, with less need of external support.

An attitude survey conducted for the Countryside Agency by NOP in 2004 revealed:

- 59% of rural people said that not having enough affordable housing was a problem in their area (compared to 50% in urban areas).

- 32% of rural people, when asked about services availability in their local area, said that there were not enough.

- However, 71% of rural people thought that they had a better quality of life than urban residents. Only 27% of urban respondents thought they had a better quality of life than people living in the countryside.

“I used to think village life was the ideal – lots of community spirit and friends – and I suppose it is – until you fall off the edge”
(Karen who suffers mental illness, South Oxfordshire – Breaking Down Barriers, Social Exclusion in Oxfordshire, 2004).
Tools to tackle disadvantage

A range of responses have been designed and pursued to tackle disadvantage at both national and local level. Government policy responses broadly fall into two main categories: those which are targeted at the individual, including income related benefits, state pensions and tax credits; and those which identify a needy geographical area at which to target resources such as the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund or SureStart initiative.

Separately, there are many examples of local initiatives designed to address disadvantage within a community or locality. Such responses often involve the voluntary and community sector and operate on a partnership basis with funding drawn from a range of sources from local and regional to national and European programmes.

It is not the purpose of this short note to try and evaluate the success of initiatives, or even to summarise all of the existing evidence about their impacts. Instead, three pieces of research are noted as fairly representative:

Individual/welfare state approach: Research suggests that the early phase of the New Deal for Young People programme was “at least as successful in rural areas as in urban areas” in terms of finding jobs for unemployed people. However, a number of modifications were suggested to improve the effectiveness of its delivery in rural areas and its ability to reach the most isolated individuals (The performance of the New Deal for Young People in rural areas of England, the Countryside Agency, 2001).

Area Based Initiatives: Analysis of the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund activity in West Cornwall identified a number of areas of good practice, but found that Fund expenditure should be refocused to address needs that rural areas have in particular, such as transport and access to services and that there needed to be better information on rural outcomes (Rural Proofing and Best Practice in Neighbourhood Renewal, the Countryside Agency, 2004).

Bottom up/local response: The Wessex Reinvestment Trust is a sub-regional rural Community Development Finance Institution, which aims to meet the needs of individuals and businesses whose needs are not met by mainstream financial services. The Trust has developed the link between employment, enterprise and property and revealed demand for locally delivered loan services to develop enterprise and facilitate access to affordable housing and workspaces. It appears to have met specific local needs.
Emerging issues and policy impacts

Recent research (summarised by Shucksmith, 2003) on the characteristics of rural disadvantage suggests that principal groups experiencing poverty in rural areas are:

- Elderly people living alone and elderly couples relying on a state pension.
- Children, especially of lone parents or of workless households.
- Low paid and seasonally employed manual workers, often in tourism or agriculture based industries.
- Those detached from the labour market either through unemployment, incapacity or through other responsibilities, such as carers.
- Self-employed people in low income sectors.

The Social Exclusion Unit, in their report, *Tackling Social Exclusion: Taking stock and looking to the future* (2004) also identified groups for whom policies consistently seem less effective across Britain as a whole. These groups are highlighted below, together with emerging evidence about the rural dimension:

**People with physical or mental health problems:** the rate of suicides amongst young males is higher in rural areas (8.5) than the England average (7.2) (*Indicators of poverty and social exclusion in rural England*, the Countryside Agency, 2002). The SEU report *Mental health and social exclusion* (2004) found that deprived areas and remote rural districts have the highest levels of mental health problems.

**Those who lack skills or qualifications:** 25% of adults in small rural settlements have no qualifications. The average for England as a whole is 29% (*Indicators of poverty and social exclusion in rural England*, the Countryside Agency, 2002).

**People from ethnic minority groups, including asylum seekers and refugees:** there is some evidence that people from black and minority ethnic communities face particular barriers in rural areas. In Northumberland as many as one in 12 people within ethnic minority communities is likely to have experienced a racist incident (*Young people, crime and anti-social behaviour in rural communities*, Forum for Rural Children and Young People, 2004).

“Living in a village was very hard with a newborn. There were no buses to go into town and I didn’t drive. I felt isolated from everybody and everything. I also felt that everybody had a life and I was a boring single mum. I wondered where my life had gone.”

(Julie, lone parent family, Oxfordshire - *Breaking Down Barriers, Social Exclusion in Oxfordshire*, 2004).
The Social Exclusion Unit report also suggests a number of key drivers which will throw up risks and opportunities to tackle social exclusion in the future. Some of these are particularly relevant in rural areas:

**An ageing population leading to higher demands for care:** a high proportion (18%) of the rural population is already aged 65 or over. Evidence shows that those aged over 60 are almost as likely to be in low income households in rural areas as elsewhere. This group forms a large section of the rural poor – over a quarter.

**More single person households leading to more social isolation:** this may be a particular issue in rural areas where geography can exacerbate social isolation, especially for those who do not own a car.

**Increasing ethnic diversity:** at present, minority ethnic groups are only a small proportion of rural populations. Specific issues include migrant workers (for example in agriculture), asylum seekers, gypsies and travellers.
Your voice

The Commission for Rural Communities division will soon be starting work on a major study about rural disadvantage. A growing and useful body of knowledge has been developed, but it is clear there remain gaps and weaknesses in the evidence base. Furthermore, success in tackling rural disadvantage will depend partly upon sound evidence about the policies and approaches that work. This topic is right at the top of the Commission’s agenda, but it is not something it can or would wish to pursue alone. As a starting point, therefore, your views are invited on the questions below, the answers to which we will use to help us define the terms of reference for the study.

1 **Do you agree with the definitions of disadvantage, social exclusion and poverty quoted in this document?**

It would be useful to know whether more work on definitions was felt to be useful and would be of practical benefit. In particular, whether it would help if there was more of a common understanding amongst policy makers. You may have views about the extent to which current definitions take sufficient account of rural issues and variations between different types of rural settlement or area.

2 **What aspects of rural disadvantage do you consider to be most important?**

It would be useful to know, in terms of disadvantage issues, where you consider the balance of effort should go within this study. If you think there are significant issues or themes not covered in this document, it would be helpful to know what these are. This could include issues that are more important in some rural areas than in others, or it could include issues that you think have a particular rural angle (distinct from urban experiences).

3 **Are there specific population groups within rural communities to which the study should pay particular attention?**

You may wish to let us know whether this document lists the main groups at risk of rural disadvantage. One possibility is to assess disadvantage around different issues or events that generally happen to people at different ages.
Are there significant gaps in the evidence base on rural disadvantage?

As well as researching new issues and plugging information gaps, you may think that recent developments in data availability and rural definitions make some issues worthy of re-analysis.

In responding to this question you may wish to consider more qualitative information and data about perceptions of disadvantage. Indeed, there could be new ways to gather information, including from disadvantaged groups, that offer new opportunities. There may be value in developing our understanding of the way that disadvantage can pass from one generation to the next.

In terms of addressing rural disadvantage, what policy areas or policy initiatives would most benefit from detailed examination?

Rural areas benefit to varying degrees from a wide variety of public policy interventions and initiatives, which at one extreme are very local and at the other target disadvantaged people wherever they live (in England). You may think we lack good evidence about the rural impact of some of these or, even, how they work together, especially where policies have recently been changed. Perhaps you see scope for exploring new policy approaches.

Are there emerging issues or trends that you think could have important impacts on the scale, nature and distribution of rural disadvantage?

During the next 5, 10 or 20 years it may be that some trends will significantly alter or impact on rural disadvantage. These could be as a result of demographic, socio-economic, policy, technological, attitudinal, environmental or other factors. It may be that these lead us towards important policy lessons, sooner rather than later.

Responses should reach us by Wednesday 20th April 2005 either as an e-mail or in writing to:

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What happens next

We plan to complete this study by early 2006, though interim results may be available sooner. Work, knowledge and ideas from a wide range of bodies, including service providers, researchers, think tanks, voluntary groups and other organisations will be essential in helping us to create a robust and challenging report on rural disadvantage.

We look forward to receiving your responses to the questions in this document and you can also stay in touch by visiting www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/disadvantage where you can register your interest in joining our rural disadvantage learning network. There may also be other opportunities to get involved – for example, through workshops and seminars.
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