



The Need for a Classification of Local Authority Districts Based upon Levels of 'Rurality'.

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1. A Classification of Local Authority Districts as 'Rural/Urban'.

The Rural and Urban Definitions Project Board decided not to create a District / Unitary Authority level definition of rural areas for three reasons:

- (i) the measures of rurality used to classify wards and census output areas are based upon the proportion of the population in small towns, villages and scattered settlements. These cannot be used at local authority level because local authorities are, in a sense, *designed* to have a significant proportion of their population in urban centres,
- (ii) as a consequence, over 75 percent of local authorities have more than 50 percent of their populations resident in urban areas with more than 10,000 population,
- (iii) even local authorities with large urban populations could have significant tracts of 'rurality' within their areas and a simple 'rural/urban' dichotomy was considered un-realistic as a basis for a district level definition.

The question remains as to whether there is a need, in general terms, for a local authority level definition of 'rural'? If there is such a need, two further questions arise: how should the classification be constructed and how should large 'rural' or market towns with more than 10,000 population be integrated into the definition?

2 Arguments For and Against a Local Authority District Level Definition of 'Rural'.

Arguments For:

- there has been a definition of 'rural' at district level since 1993 and if a new definition is not created the current (i.e. 'Tarling') definition might prevail despite its acknowledged weaknesses,
- much important administrative data (e.g. local government performance data or Office of the Deputy Prime Minister planning statistics), is only published at local authority level and it is often useful to conduct rural/urban comparisons of such data,
- Defra has identified a set of Disadvantaged (Rural) Districts and a set of more broadly defined 'rural' districts would act as a useful 'counterfactual' in analyses of rural productivity,
- It is possible that organisations will create rural definitions at district level for their own purposes and so repeat the confusion found with previous definitions.¹

Arguments Against:

- a district level definition cannot be based on the same measures as the new rural definition because of the preponderance of urban populations in all districts,
- any changes to local government structure following regional devolution would make it necessary to re-align a rural definition, possibly to larger areas,
- the need to include the populations of larger 'market towns' (i.e. between 10,000 and c 25,000 population), in a district level definition, would require a means of identifying such towns in (rural) functional terms,
- there are few, if any, rural policies that are reliant upon a simple, binary rural/urban definition at district level, and
- under any classification scheme there will always be some local authority districts who believe they have been mis-classified.

¹ For example, the Office for National Statistics has produced a classification of local authorities based upon socio-economic data which identifies a set of 'countryside and coastal' authorities which might be used as a *de facto* rural definition at this level.

3 How Might a District Level Definition Be Constructed?

A definition of rural districts should use the rationale of the current definition (i.e. settlement structure) but should add the criteria necessary to deal with the fact that some local authorities have larger (over 10,000 population) towns with important rural functions within them. The general approach is shown on Maps 1 and 2.

Map 1 shows the proportion of households in a district who live in wards classified as 'rural' under the new definition. A critical issue is the 'cut-off' point, in terms of the percentage of households that are 'rural', used to identify 'rural' local authority districts. A 'cut-off' level of 50 percent of households might appear acceptable although many rural districts on the current (Tarling) definition fall well below this level. The numbers of districts in each numerical class (including the Isles of Scilly), are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: *Number of Local Authority Districts with Different Proportions of Households in Small Towns, Villages and Scattered Settlements*

Percentage	Number
Over 50	77
33 - 50	44
25 - 33	37
10 - 25	50
Less than 10	146
Total	354

Inspection of the map coupled with some background knowledge suggests that a range of cut-off points could identify rural districts. Comparison with the current (Tarling) definition illustrates this point. Thus there are 14 districts classified as 'urban' under Tarling, but which have over 30 percent of their households in (new definition) rural wards. On the other hand, there are 32 districts classified by Tarling as 'rural', but with less than 32 percent of their households located in rural wards.²

4 Bringing in the Larger Market Towns

One reason for the need for careful consideration of 'cut-off' points lies in the nature of the (rural) settlement structure of individual local authority districts, an important element of which is the larger market towns. Under the new definition, *urban areas* with more than 10,000 population are excluded from the methodology, but the Rural White Paper regards urban areas in the population range 2000 to c. 20,000 as 'market towns'.

² In the former situation, Easington, Bolsover, NE Derbyshire and Durham are notable with over 40 percent of households in rural wards. In the latter situation, Thanet, Arun, Pendle, Congleton and Canterbury have less than 20 percent of households in rural wards.

Map 2 shows the pattern of 'hub' market towns as defined for the Countryside Agency, superimposed on the proportion of households in rural wards within districts.

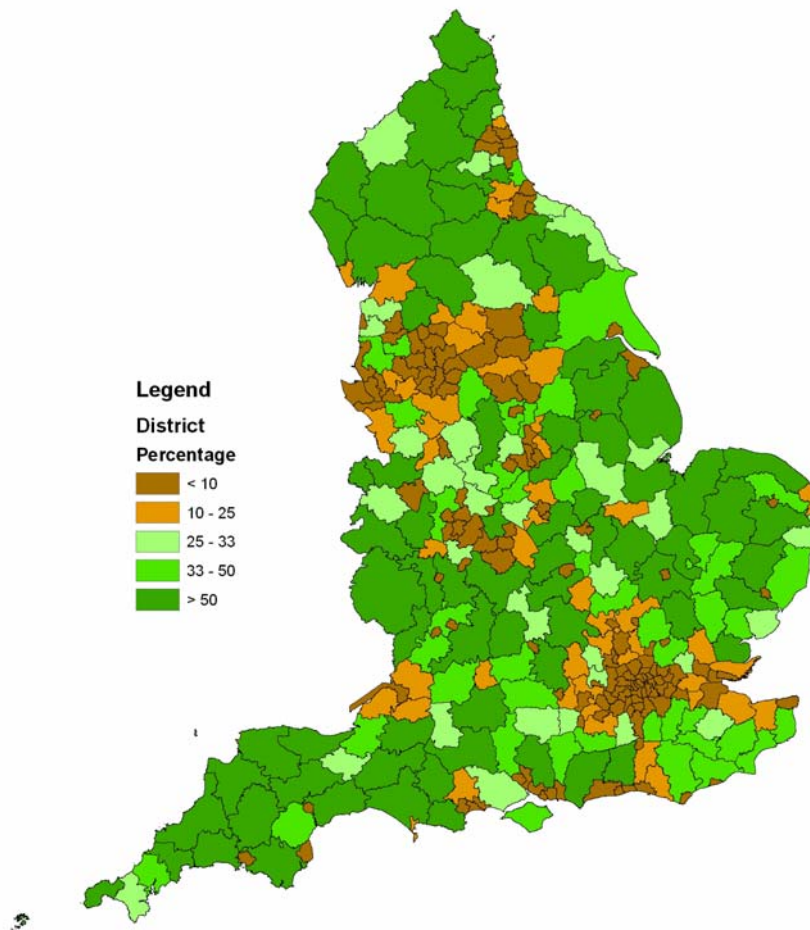
One example illustrates the issue. 'Hub' market towns have levels of service and job provision that could be assumed to serve a wider rural area. Under the new definition West Wiltshire has less than 33 percent of its population in rural wards, but in this district over 70,000 people out of a total of 118,000 live in four large 'hub' market towns which are termed 'urban' for definitional purposes.

5 Decisions Required

Decisions on the following are required:

- should Defra sponsor an 'official definition of rural local authorities?
- should such a definition be of a simple 'binary (rural/urban) form or of a more complex structure?
- how should such a definition be constructed i.e. should elements of the new definition at ward/output area be used?
- how should larger (>10,000 population) market towns be defined and incorporated in the definition?

Map 1: England Local Authorities: percentage of households in small towns, villages and scattered settlements.



Map 2: England Local Authorities: percentage of households in small towns, villages and scattered settlements and large market towns.

