



RERC Response to the Invitation to Submit Views on the Defra Evidence and Innovation Strategy 2005-08.

January 2006

Introduction

The Rural Evidence Research Centre (RERC) welcomes the opportunity to comment on Defra's Evidence and Innovation Strategy 2005-08. Our work is associated primarily with that of the Rural Affairs Division within Defra and hence this response focuses on Chapter 19 in the Evidence and Innovation Strategy document, though there are close links with Chapters 3, 4 and 15.

The RERC, which comprises a consortium of six university departments, was established in November 2004 to develop a rural evidence base to support policy. Defra specified three areas of work in which it would welcome evidence – the new rural definition, longitudinal studies and capacity studies. However, as the Centre has evolved we have, in consultation with Defra, also developed areas of work we see as important to strategic rural policy making. Our research priorities and approaches for the next 12-15 months are set out in our recent 'Research Outlook' paper. This has been circulated within Defra and might usefully be considered alongside the comments in this note.

Our work thus far has built on the considerable benefits to rural policy making of the new rural definition, its application to other administrative units such as local authorities and primary care organisations and its linkage to a wide range of aggregate data such as the 1991 and 2001 censuses. A concentration so far on aggregate data (though not to the exclusion of household and individual data), has been important for a number of reasons. These relate directly to the content and emphases in Chapter 19 of the Evidence and Innovation Strategy document. They include a need to make full use of the 2001 census in understanding modern rural demographic, social and economic patterns, a need to understand how the rural/urban interface is articulated and how the particular nature of the rural settlement pattern impinges on the development of evidence on rural social exclusion (including issues of housing affordability) and a need to add a nationally comprehensive time dimension to rural analyses.

The RERC very much welcomes the publication of the Evidence and Innovation Strategy 2005 – 2008. Defra is to be congratulated in producing such a comprehensive and valuable document. We now respond to the specifics of the consultation document, prefaced with a general comment.

The Strategic Context of Rural Enterprise and Social Exclusion

The argument of Chapter 19 of the Evidence and Innovation Strategy document contains many references to ‘places’, ‘areas’ and ‘place to place differences’ within rural England. There are also references to ‘national, regional and local’ level ‘views’ (implying ‘analyses’?) of such differences. This is entirely right given that *diversity* and *change* are fundamental dimensions of contemporary rural England so far as policy development and evaluation are concerned. However, to be useful for analytical purposes, ‘diversity’ – paradoxically perhaps – requires a framework for representational purposes and in order to convey its meaning and implications in policy terms.

One important type of strategic context for many aspects of the evidence needs implied by the concerns of Chapter 19 is a comprehensive geographical analysis of the social and economic structure of rural England (including, where the data allow, change in that structure).¹ Because different views are given by different levels of analysis, the strategic context would ideally be represented at different spatial scales ranging from detailed gridded data (now available as part of the new rural definition), through the hierarchy of census reporting areas to local authorities and other administrative areas. This would not, except perhaps in some very specific instances, constitute a set of territorial units to which particular policies are applied, but the necessary basis for ‘grounding’ the development and articulation of policy.

This ‘spatial template’ for rural policy should be widely known and understood. The need for such a policy tool is implicit in the following responses to the questions appended to Chapter 19.

19.i Are the issues covered by the five policy outcomes comprehensive? Are there any important omissions?

There are arguments for creating a separate category of policy outcomes associated with *health* issues given their salience in relation to an ageing demographic profile in rural areas; there are also issues associated with rural proofing the proposed reforms of health organisations and their impact on the delivery of health care in rural areas. The RERC has recently provided Defra with

¹ An interesting example of this is the document *Quelle France Rurale pour 2020?* published by DATAR, Paris in September 2003 and described as ‘un contribution à une nouvelle politique de développement rural durable’.

a comprehensive review of rural health research and has drawn conclusions for further work.

19.ii What are your views on the relative importance of these five policy outcomes? Should any of them be given a particularly high or low rating.

Economic success may be regarded as having some priority given its wider impact on access to goods and services and well being for the rural community as a whole. However, we would also emphasize the *linkages* between the five identified outcomes (+ health), and suggest that a part, at least, of the evidence gathering strategies focus on identifying and assessing the potential impact of such linkages. This will also entail more understanding of the different rural contexts in which interlinked 'issues' are set.

19.iii Do you think any of the identified needs are of lesser importance, or already sufficiently covered by evidence from elsewhere?

No, rather the need is for an additional, new research perspective on these issues along the lines indicated here.

19.iv Which of the Evidence & Innovation needs do you consider most pressing?

The intention as stated in the Evidence and Innovation Strategy, Figure 19) to conduct 'tightly focused research and analysis to explore the specific requirements of the most needy sub-groups' is an important step in the right direction. However, it is not clear how this is going to be done in an effective and efficient manner given the particular and varying characteristics of rural areas and the (understandable but surely not insurmountable) constraints on disclosure on, for example, household based benefits data. In a generally affluent countryside the problems of both 'social exclusion' and 'fair access to services' affects a small number of difficult to identify, difficult to reach residents of rural areas.

Related to this, as stated in the 'evidence' section on social exclusion, is the intention to develop 'well-being indices... to compare well being over time and across rural and urban areas.' We would recommend caution here. The record of all area-based measures (which is what appears to be suggested) of deprivation or exclusion in rural areas is not a good one - even at the current IMD Super Output Area level. Much is likely to be concealed by internal averaging. What we really need is a methodological debate on how to deal effectively with measuring exclusion and access problems for small numbers of rural residents who may be quite widely scattered. The attached note (Annex 1), from the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the Institute of Education identifies the broader

nature of the problem of identifying contexts and instances of rural social exclusion. The next step is research on both better targeting and more effective 'bundling' of policies to alleviate social disadvantage in rural areas.

19.v Assuming that supplying the Evidence & Innovation needs for sustainable rural communities requires more resource than Defra alone can supply, which other bodies would be involved in evidence gathering and/or analysis?

We trust that experience of working with academics via the RERC and, in a different way, with RELU and other specialist rural research organisations has been useful. Evaluation of this experience might widen and deepen such relationships in the future.

19.vi How should Defra work with these partners? How can we ensure that our respective contributions are complementary and do not duplicate each other.

We would recommend that further consideration be given to working closely with the academic sector along the lines suggested in the Academy of Learned Societies for the Social Sciences Report *Great Expectations* published in 2003. The avoidance of duplication has been greatly facilitated by the publication on the Defra website of commissioned research and reviews. However, easier access via this source to the current and future research programme (including potential research needs) and the initiation of a debate on the implications of a diverse rurality for the development of rural policy is recommended, possibly via a 'DATAR' like document (see footnote.1).

19.vii How might Defra work more effectively with delivery agents or with policy makers from other Government departments to ensure all rural residents benefit from economic and social progress?

By clarifying and establishing in the institutional consciousness the specific and broadly quantifiable rural dimensions of social and economic policy. The demonstration of the differing impacts of these dimensions via the 'rural spatial template' would be valuable in this respect.

19.viii Do you have any other comments on how Defra might improve its Evidence and Innovation Strategy?

Specific considerations are as follows:

- undertake/commission an *audit* of areas in which the rural dimension of official statistics and surveys can be improved, all too frequently sample sizes and disclosure rules militate against usable rural statistics, especially in the social exclusion and business spheres,
- promote the particular needs of the rural dimension in government data gathering, analysis and presentation more effectively,
- identify and specify more clearly the specific rural *dimensions* of policies, for example, are policies related to broad concepts such as 'sparsity' and 'access', are they identified with particular settlement patterns or types of rural area?
- initiate a programme of research on identifying and specifying the *linkages* between environment (including agriculture) and social/economic change as a prelude to work on the impact of environmental policies on rural communities and businesses,
- produce a document along the lines of the 'DATAR' document creating and explaining the role of a 'view' of the social and economic diversity of rural England as a context for national rural policy.

Professor John Shepherd
Birkbeck College
University of London

on behalf of the Rural Evidence Research Centre.

January 2006

Annex 1

Towards an Understanding of the Incidence of Rural Social Exclusion, some evidence from the Millennium Cohort Survey. A note from the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education University of London

We can get some idea of the distribution of poverty and social exclusion over rural and urban areas of England, and the relative spatial concentration from responses in the Millennium Cohort survey given, mainly in 2001, by families who had a new birth during the period September 2000 to August 2001. Clearly this may not apply to other age groups in the population, but the patterns found are nevertheless likely to be indicative. Poverty is for this purpose defined as having net family income (roughly ‘equivalised’, i.e. adjusted for family size and composition) below 60% of the median. Other dimensions of social exclusion are picked up on a few indicators such as use of formal advice services, vehicle access, and internet access as illustrations.

The incidence of poverty thus defined was lower in rural and semi-rural areas than urban England, which is another way of saying that relatively affluent people are more likely to live in the countryside, especially villages and more dispersed areas, but not that there are no poor people there at all. Around one in six of the families interviewed in rural areas were below this income line, compared with nearly one in three in Urban England

A relevant difference is that the poor families in towns and cities were much more likely to be found in areas in which poverty concentrated than those living in villages and dispersed rural areas: Virtually none of the ‘village poor’ live in areas classified as high child poverty zones, whereas 39% of the poor living in fringe/small towns and 48% of the urban poor.

	Village/ dispersed	Rural town/ fringe	Urban
Percentage of all families below 60% median equivalent H-hold income	15	17	30
Percentage of all families living in ward with concentrations of child poverty *	1	19	27
Percentage of poor families living in high poverty wards	3	39	48**

*Living in 2001 in electoral wards with more than 38% of children under 16 in families receiving low-income – tested benefits in 1998 (top quartile in England and Wales) but not including wards with high minority ethnic populations, most of which also had high concentrations of low-income families, and all of which were in urban England.

**Split between market towns (42.4%) and other urban places (55.1%)

As one indicator of the social exclusion thought to be associated with poverty we looked at responses to a question about sources of advice (other than family or neighbours) to whom a mother had turned. Sources include GP, Health Visitor, Church and other advice services.

Percentage of mothers of who had not sought advice for their child from health service and other formal services

Rurality	'Poor'	'Non-Poor'
Villages/dispersed	43	28
Small towns/rural fringe	51	41
Market towns	52	33
Other urban	47	35

Poor mothers were less likely than others to have had to any of these. In villages 43 percent of the poor had had not used any of these sources of advice, compared with 28 percent of the non-poor in villages. This indicator of social exclusion it seems that the contrast between poor and non-poor is greater wherever they live that the type of geographical setting, though there is some tendency for both low income and other families to be better served in villages than elsewhere. The advantage of villages in this respect for the low income families came from greater use of Health Visitors.

Percentage of young mothers with access to a vehicle

Rurality	'Poor'	'Non-Poor'
Villages/dispersed	87.9	98.3
Small towns/rural fringe	75.7	97.4
Market towns	60.6	95.8
Other urban	59.4	93.3

There is a clear contrast between the two income groups for access to a vehicle. As might be expected, in both groups there is a decrease in car access towards more urban areas, perhaps due to the increased provision of public transport, with less necessity for a car, as in more rural areas.

Percentage of young mothers with access to the internet (at home or at work)

Rurality	'Poor'	'Non-Poor'
Villages/dispersed	40.2	77.5
Small towns/rural fringe	32.4	70.8
Market towns	18.7	65.9
Other urban	23.7	67.1

Using access to the internet as another indicator of social inclusion, which might compensate for the difficulties of transport in rural areas, we look at whether the families in the Millennium cohort had access to the internet either at home or at work. Less than half (40%) of the rural poor families in villages had such access compared to 78% of the rural non-poor. People in more densely populated areas had somewhat less internet access. The contrast between the poor and non-poor is very distinct, with much greater access to the internet for those with higher income.

Professor Heather Joshi
Gareth Hughes
CLS/loE January 2006