



## **A Classification of Parliamentary Constituencies by Rural\_Urban Type and an Analysis of General Election Results 2001- 2005.**

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### **1 Summary**

- 1.1 This paper uses the new rural/urban definition to classify Parliamentary Constituencies in England and Wales into six main types based upon their predominant settlement pattern. The six types are 'Major Urban', 'Large Urban', 'Other Urban', 'Significant Rural', 'Rural 50' and 'Rural 75'. This classification is then used to analyse electoral and voting data from the 2001 and 2005 General Elections with a focus on 'rural' constituencies.
- 1.2 The first part of the paper explains how the classification is derived and indicates its value in analytical and policy terms. The criteria for classification are the numbers and proportions of people living in a Parliamentary Constituency who are resident in urban areas of various size and in rural settlements ranging from large market towns and small rural towns to villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings. Application of such a classification results in 372 'urban' constituencies (185 'Major Urban', 77 'Large Urban' and 110 'Other Urban') and 197 'rural' constituencies (54 'Significant Urban', 55 called 'Rural 50' and 88 called 'Rural 75').
- 1.3 Using this classification it is found that in England between the 2001 and 2005 General Elections there was a relative *decrease* in the numbers of people registered to vote in the urban types of constituency but significant *increases* in electorates in rural constituencies. There were especially high increases in electorates in the more deeply rural constituencies. In Wales the pattern of change in electorates was markedly different with growth in the major urban areas. Turnout increased marginally more in rural than in urban constituencies: by 3.9 percent in major urban constituencies in England compared with 4.7 percent in Rural 75 constituencies.

1.4 Some findings from an analysis of election results by rural/urban constituency type for England are as follows:

- in 2005 the Conservative Party recorded 3.62 million votes in the three rural types of constituency and increased its vote most in 'Significant Rural' constituencies i.e. by 8.5 percent compared with a total increase of 5.3 percent,
- in 2005 the Labour Party recorded 2.28 million votes in rural constituencies; its vote declined overall by -11.2 percent though the decline was slightly *less* in the most rural constituencies i.e. by -10.3 percent in 'Rural 50' constituencies and by -10.3 percent in 'Rural 75' constituencies,
- the Liberal Democrat Party recorded 2.11 million votes in rural constituencies, its vote increasing by 37.4 percent in 'Major Urban' constituencies and by *less* than their overall change in vote (23.6 percent) in each of the three types of rural constituency and by only 13.9 percent in 'Rural 75' constituencies,
- in 2001, the Conservatives won 104 seats in rural areas , Labour won 67 and the Liberal Democrats won 20 and 'Other' parties won 5 rural seats; in 2005 the number of 'rural' seats won were 117, 55, 20 and 4 respectively.
- the *total* of votes cast for other parties in 2005 was 1.4 million, it rose most in 'Large Urban' constituencies (82.9 percent) but also rose significantly in the two most rural types of constituency (48 percent and 46 percent).

## 2 Introduction

2.1 The purpose of this note is to introduce a classification of English and Welsh Parliamentary Constituencies based upon an urban-rural 'spectrum' of settlement types and to use this classification to analyse changes in the electorate, turnout, party vote and seats won in the 2001 and 2005 General Elections.

2.2 Parliamentary Constituencies are classified using the new definition of rural/urban areas published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in July 2004<sup>1</sup> and applies procedures of classification virtually the same as those used in the Defra classification of rural/urban Local Authority Districts and Unitary Authorities.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/geography/nrudp.asp>

<sup>2</sup> [http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/rural\\_resd/rural\\_definition.asp](http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/rural_resd/rural_definition.asp)

2.3 There are various reasons why an rural/urban classification of Parliamentary Constituencies with a particular focus on 'rurality' as expressed in the new rural definition might be useful at the present time:

- the current formal designation of Parliamentary Constituencies as 'borough' (i.e. 'urban') and 'county' (i.e. 'rural'), by the Boundary Commissions for England and Wales is not especially useful for analytical purposes being based upon an un-measured criterion which results in a simple binary classification of areas,
- a classification based upon the settlement pattern as the indicator of 'rurality' focuses attention on those issues which impact upon people living in the countryside such as access to services, transport and the environment, and
- a graded classification based upon a single, measured criterion (or criterion type), permits the 'controlled' addition of other criteria (e.g. social and economic measures), in order to shed light on the combined effects of 'rurality' and voting behaviour on political outcomes.

2.4 The study of voting behaviour is a complex subject now entailing a wide range of different types of national, regional, local and behavioural explanatory factors. The electoral results presented in the second part of this note comprise only the most salient findings of the present analysis, though more detailed regional breakdowns of the data are given in a series of appendices.

### **3 'County' and 'Borough' Constituencies.**

3.1 The Boundary Commissions for England and for Wales 'designate' Parliamentary Constituencies as either 'borough' or 'county' for the purposes of the administration of elections and for calculating electoral expenses. The criterion for designation is the degree of rurality in a constituency, though what this is in precise terms is left open to interpretation. There might also be a presumption in favour of 'rurality', for as the Commission states:

*"... as a general principle, where constituencies contain more than a small rural element they should normally be designated as county constituencies. Otherwise they should be designated as borough constituencies."*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Boundary Commission for England, The Review of Parliamentary Constituencies in England, 2000, page 13, paragraph 11

3.2 There appear to be no further criteria for identifying rural other than the use of the term 'a small rural element'. In 1995, following the last general review of Parliamentary Constituency boundaries, there were 265 'borough' constituencies and 304 'county' constituencies in England and Wales (6 'borough' and 34 'county' constituencies in Wales). The result is a classification of 'borough' constituencies restricted mainly to 'metropolitan' areas and other (mainly larger) urban areas situated within a large swathe of otherwise undifferentiated 'county' constituencies (Annex 1 Map 1).

#### **4 A Rural/Urban Classification of Parliamentary Constituencies**

4.1 An alternative approach to classifying Parliamentary Constituencies is based upon clear criteria for defining 'rurality' and creates a 'spectrum' of rural/urban constituencies based upon the predominant local settlement pattern. The approach to classification is analogous to that used to classify local authority districts and unitary authorities for England.

4.2 The principle underlying the approach is the identification of the proportions of the total population of a constituency in settlements ranging from those clearly defined as 'urban', through smaller (rural) towns and their fringes, to villages, hamlets and dispersed dwellings. The classification process falls into two main stages:

4.3 In stage 1 Census Output Areas (COAs) are allocated to four broad classes according to whether they are located within one of the following types of area:

- the six 'major' urban areas with more than 750,000 population in England and two with more than 250,00 population in Wales,
- the 17 'large' urban areas with between 250,000 and 750,000 population in England and one with just under 140,000 population in Wales,<sup>4</sup>
- an urban area over 10,000 population which is *not* identified as a 'larger market town',<sup>5</sup> and

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<sup>4</sup> The difference in criteria is seen as being relative to the different size distributions of urban areas in the two countries.

<sup>5</sup> The ONS urban/rural definition identifies all settlements with more than 10,000 population as 'urban'. However, some towns larger than this should be considered 'rural' in functional terms. For the purposes of the LAD/UA classification 207 urban areas with between 10,000 and 30,000 population were so identified and included in the 'rural' element of the population for classification. Further details can be found in the papers relating to the LAD/UA classification.

- the remaining ‘rural’ set of COAs deemed to be ‘rural’ under the new rural/urban definition but including those COAs comprising the ‘larger market towns’<sup>6</sup>

4.4 In stage 2 Parliamentary Constituencies are allocated to one of six groups using the following criteria:

- a ‘**major urban**’ constituency has at least 50 percent of its population within a major urban area,
- a ‘**large urban**’ constituency has at least 50 percent of its population within a ‘large urban area’,
- an ‘**other urban**’ constituency has less than 30 percent of its population rural *and* does not qualify as a ‘major urban’ or ‘large urban’ constituency,
- a ‘**significant rural**’ constituency has more than 30 percent but less than 50 percent of its population in rural settlements (including ‘larger market towns’ where these occur),
- a ‘**rural 50**’ constituency has more than 50 percent but less than 75 percent of its population in rural settlements (including ‘larger market towns’ where these occur), and
- a ‘**rural 75**’ constituency has more than 75 percent of its population in rural settlements (including ‘larger market towns’ where these occur).<sup>7</sup>

4.5 The classification produces 372 ‘urban’ and 197 ‘rural’ constituencies in England and Wales – 65 percent and 35 percent respectively of all constituencies. The national and regional breakdowns of constituencies by rural/urban type is given in Table 1. Just under one third (31 percent) of all constituencies are in the ‘major urban’ category whilst fewer than 15 percent are in the ‘large urban’ category, which is a reflection, in part, of the ‘tightly bounded’ nature of ‘borough’ constituencies. Around one fifth of constituencies are term ‘other urban’ and these are mainly a mix of urban and rural areas.

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<sup>6</sup> Note that under the rural/urban definition the ‘rural’ category of COAs is further refined according to whether a COA has the majority of its population resident in village, hamlet or dispersed settlements.

<sup>7</sup> The numerical boundaries between one class and another are based on close inspection of the statistical distribution of relevant values. Further details would be provided in a longer paper.

**Table 1: The National/Regional Classification of Parliamentary Constituencies According to Settlement Character.**

	Major	Large	Other	Sig.Rural	Rural 50	Rural 75	Total
Region	Urban	Urban	Urban				
North East	11	4	4	0	5	6	30
North West	36	10	16	5	3	6	76
Yorks & Humbs	18	11	12	4	5	6	56
East Midlands	0	11	11	5	10	7	44
West Midlands	26	7	8	9	3	6	59
East of England	5	4	20	5	7	15	56
London	74	0	0	0	0	0	74
South East	7	18	22	15	11	10	83
South West	0	10	10	6	8	17	51
Wales	8	2	8	4	3	15	40
England	177	75	103	49	52	73	529
<b>England and Wales</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>569</b>

4.6 Table 2 shows the numbers of residents in settlements of various kinds within constituencies and also suggests the degree of heterogeneity of settlement kinds between constituencies, an important feature of the new rural definition. Thus within 'major urban' and 'large urban' constituencies there are over 1 million people who live in rural settlements with a further 1 million in such places in 'Other Urban' constituencies. The particular nature of 'Rural 75' constituencies is also brought out in this table which shows over 1.2 million people living in hamlets and isolated dwellings, the most scattered form of rural development.

**Table 2: The Population ('000s) of the Settlement Components of Parliamentary Constituencies Classified by Settlement Type.**

	Total	URBAN			RURAL				
		MUA	LUA	OUA	LMT	RTown	Village	Hamlet	Rural
<b>Major Urban</b>	16,910	16,182	0	186	119	259	94	70	542
<b>Large urban</b>	6,992	0	6,228	238	176	197	101	53	527
<b>Other Urban</b>	10,244	106	147	8,913	60	538	324	156	1,078
<b>Sig Rural</b>	4,980	215	122	2,673	485	681	541	264	1,970
<b>Rural 50</b>	5,027	95	336	1,587	742	1,079	845	343	3,009
<b>Rural 75</b>	7,892	0	47	351	2,135	2,163	1,983	1,212	7,493
<b>Total</b>	52,045	16,597	6,881	13,948	3,717	4,917	3,887	2,098	14,619

4.7 Annex1 Map 2 shows the geographic pattern of rural/urban constituencies. Again, it brings out the 'tightly bounded' nature of most Parliamentary Constituencies as shown clearly at two geographic scales :that of the major and large urban areas and the free-standing 'Other Urban' constituencies. Just over two fifths (43 percent) of constituencies in the South East are in the 'rural' category, not far behind the East of England

and the South West which are generally perceived to be archetypal 'rural' regions. The extensive swathes of 'deeply rural' constituencies in Wales, the far north of England, East Anglia and the South West are also apparent.

- 4.8 The cross referencing of borough/county constituencies with settlement classes is shown in Table 3. Notable points are the 25 'major urban' and 25 'large urban' constituencies designated as 'rural' by the Boundary Commissions the curiosity of Blyth Valley designated as a borough constituency even though it has more than 50 percent of its population in rural settlements.

**Table 3: Parliamentary Constituencies by Rural/Urban Type and Boundary Commission Designation (England and Wales).**

	Major Urban	Large Urban	Other Urban	Significant Rural	Rural 50	Rural 75	Total
<b>Borough</b>	160	52	52		1		265
<b>County</b>	25	25	59	53	54	88	304
<b>Total</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>569</b>

- 4.9 Of the 160 constituencies identified as 'major urban' *and* 'county' in table 2, six have rural populations of less than 5 percent (e.g. Dewsbury, Rochdale and Leigh), whilst three have more than 35 percent of their population living in rural settlements (i.e. Wakefield, Keighley and South West Hertfordshire) Of the 52 constituencies identified as 'large urban' and 'county', seven have a rural population of less than 5 percent (e.g. East Worthing and Shoreham, Sheffield Hallam and Gedling), whilst four have more than 35 percent of their population in rural settlements (e.g. Chorley, Fylde, Harborough and Romsey).

## **5 Changes in the Size of Electorates of Parliamentary Constituencies**

- 5.1 Changes in the absolute and relative sizes of electorates between 2001 and 2005 by settlement type are shown separately for England and Wales in Tables 4 and 5.

**Table 4: Change in the Size of Electorate of Parliamentary Constituencies in England by Constituency Type, 2001 - 2005**

Constituency Type	Electorate (England)		Change %
	2001	2005	
Major Urban	11,904,874	11,835,982	-0.58
Large Urban	5,202,813	5,136,961	-1.27
Other Urban	7,263,566	7,274,396	0.15
Significant Rural	3,557,501	3,607,801	1.41
Rural 50	3,723,388	3,790,039	1.79
Rural 75	5,339,638	5,444,017	1.95
<b>Total</b>	<b>36,991,780</b>	<b>37,089,196</b>	<b>0.26</b>

**Table 5: Change in the Size of Electorate of Parliamentary Constituencies in Wales by Constituency Type, 2001 – 2005**

Constituency Type	Electorate (Wales)		Change %
	2001	2005	
Major Urban	463,932	476,345	2.68
Large Urban	116,564	115,243	-1.13
Other Urban	467208	460507	-1.43
Significant Rural	243770	236256	-3.08
Rural 50	168,668	170,944	1.35
Rural 75	776,181	777,192	0.13
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,236,143</b>	<b>2,236,487</b>	<b>0.02</b>

5.2 In the case of England there is an increase in growth in the proportion of registered electors as the degree of rurality increases. Aggregate electorates *declined* in the major and large city categories (note, at over twice the rate in ‘Large Urban’ constituencies compared with the ‘Major Urban’ group) and increased only slightly (i.e. at only just over half the national rate) in ‘Other Urban’ constituencies. Amongst the three clearly rural categories the growth of the electorate was five times the (English) national rate in ‘Significant Rural’ constituencies, just under seven times the national rate in ‘Rural 50’ constituencies and just under eight times the national rate in ‘Rural 75’ constituencies.<sup>8</sup>

5.3 In Wales the pattern is different. Overall, the national increase in the electorate was small – only 0.02 percent - between the two elections. The clear increase, however, was in the ‘major urban’ category (i.e. the Cardiff and Swansea urban areas), with declines in the ‘Large Urban’, ‘Other

<sup>8</sup> These trends are directly in line with the distribution of population growth and change in the age composition of the population across urban/rural England between 1991 and 2001.

Urban' and 'Significant Rural' categories - the notable growth being in the 'Rural 50' category. In Wales settlement context appears to be a more complex background to electorate change than is the case in England.

- 5.4 However, there are distinct regional differences in electorate growth within England across the three rural settlement categories. In the East of England the increase in the electorate between 2001 and 2005 was over twice the national rate in 'Rural 50' and 'Rural 75' constituencies (4.6 and 3.4 percent respectively), whilst in the South East and South West it was around or slightly above the national rate. Yorkshire and Humberside also had above national rates of increase in electorates in the most rural areas.
- 5.5 Further details on changes in electorate size within the English regions and Wales can be found in Annex 2.

## **6 Changes in Turnout and Party Support in Urban and Rural Constituencies, 2001 – 2005.**

- 6.1 Voter turnout in England was higher than the national average in rural constituencies in both England and Wales and in both elections, whereas in urban constituencies it was lower than the national average (Table 6). Turnout, also tended to increase as the degree of 'rurality' increased. However, turnout increased more between the two elections in urban constituencies compared with rural constituencies. In Wales, the position is less straightforward with only the 'Significant Rural' category increasing in voter participation and there being no evident relationship between turnout and degree of rurality.

**Table 6: Turnout (Percent) in the 2001 and 2005 General Elections by Constituency Type**

Type	England			Wales		
	2001	2005	Change	2001	2005	Change
Major Urban	55.2	57.6	2.4	59.3	59.4	0.1
Large urban	57.3	59.8	2.5	57.2	58.6	1.5
Other Urban	58.9	60.4	1.5	60.1	57.4	-2.7
Significant Rural	63.1	64.7	1.5	58.9	61.2	2.3
Rural 50	63.4	65.0	1.7	66.2	67.0	0.8
Rural 75	65.1	66.8	1.8	63.8	62.9	-0.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>59.2</b>	<b>61.2</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>61.4</b>	<b>60.9</b>	<b>-0.5</b>

- 6.2 In 2005 the Conservative Party recorded 3.8 million votes in the rural areas of England and Wales which represented 48 percent of its total vote. The Labour Party recorded 2.6 million votes in rural areas representing 26 percent of its total vote. The Liberal Democrat Party

recorded 2.24 million votes from rural constituencies representing 41 percent of its vote. Other parties polled 570,000 votes in aggregate in rural areas representing 36 percent of their vote (Table 7)

- 6.3 Table 8 shows, for England only, the change in each party's vote between the two General Elections for each category of the rural/urban classification of Parliamentary Constituencies. The Conservative Party gained more than its national increase in votes in three types of constituency : 'Other Urban', 'Significant Rural' and 'Rural 50'. The Labour Party vote declined across all categories, though by less than its overall decline in the two 'most rural' classes. In relation to its national increase in votes of 23.6 percent, the Liberal Democrat Party drew considerably more votes in 'Major Urban' constituencies but did much less well in each of the three types of rural area.

**Table 8: Change in the Number ('000s) and Percentage of Votes Cast for Political Parties in the 2001 and 2005 General Elections by Constituency Type in England.**

Settlement Type	Conservative		Labour		Lib Dem		Other	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Major Urban	95.4	5.0	-365.0	-11.2	400.0	37.4	114.3	33.7
Large Urban	18.4	1.9	-144.7	-10.7	117.5	21.5	97.3	82.9
Other Urban	78.1	5.5	-237.6	-12.4	182.8	23.7	94.1	58.0
Sig't Rural	77.9	8.5	-95.9	-12.1	76.5	18.2	28.6	25.5
Rural 50	57.2	6.0	-76.7	- 9.4	90.2	17.7	34.7	48.2
Rural 75	79.6	5.2	-96.6	-10.3	123.5	13.9	57.6	45.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>406.6</b>	<b>5.3</b>	<b>-1016.6</b>	<b>-11.2</b>	<b>990.6</b>	<b>23.6</b>	<b>426.6</b>	<b>46.0</b>

## 7 Change in Seats By Constituency Type

- 7.1 The number of seats won in the 2001 and 2005 General Elections by the main political parties and the change in the number of seats between elections by constituency type is shown in Table 9. In 2001 two thirds (66 percent) of Conservative seats were in rural areas compared with just under one-fifth (18 percent) of Labour seats. Between elections the Conservatives gained 13 seats in rural areas (compared with + 19 in urban areas) and Labour lost 12 rural seats (compared with -30 in rural areas). The number of Liberal democrat seats in rural areas remained stable.
- 7.2 Of the 12 rural seats that Labour lost in 2005 a half (6) were in constituencies with a 'significant' rural element in the population, 4 had more than 50 percent of their population in rural settlements whilst 2 were in 'Rural 75' constituencies. Of the 17 'Rural 75' constituencies held by

Labour in 2005, 7 were in Wales, 4 were in the North East (Bishop Auckland, Durham NW, Sedgefield and Wansbeck), 2 were in the North West (Copeland, Workington), 2 were in Yorkshire & Humberside (Copeland, Workington) and one was in the South West (Wansdyke).

- 7.3 In 2005, the Conservative Party was second in 390 urban constituencies and 157 rural constituencies (40 'Significant Rural', 30 'Rural 50' and 48 'Rural 75'); whilst the Labour Party was second in 141 urban and in 124 rural constituencies (32 'Significant Rural', 36 'Rural 50' and 56 'Rural 75').

**Table 9: Number of Seats Won in the 2001 and 2005 General Elections by Constituency Type.**

	Major Urban	Large Urban	Other Urban	Sig'ant Rural	Rural 50	Rural 80	Total
<b>2001</b>							
Conservative	26	18	17	22	30	52	165
Labour	151	54	85	26	22	19	357
Lib. Democrat	8	5	9	4	3	13	42
Other				1		4	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>569</b>
<b>2005</b>							
Conservative	36	19	25	29	33	55	197
Labour	132	52	76	20	18	17	315
Lib. Democrat	16	6	9	3	4	13	51
Other	1		1	1		3	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>569</b>
<b>Change '01- '05</b>							
Conservative	10	1	8	7	3	3	32
Labour	-19	-2	-9	-6	-4	-2	-42
Lib Democrat	8	1	0	-1	1	0	9
Other	1	0	1	0	0	-1	1

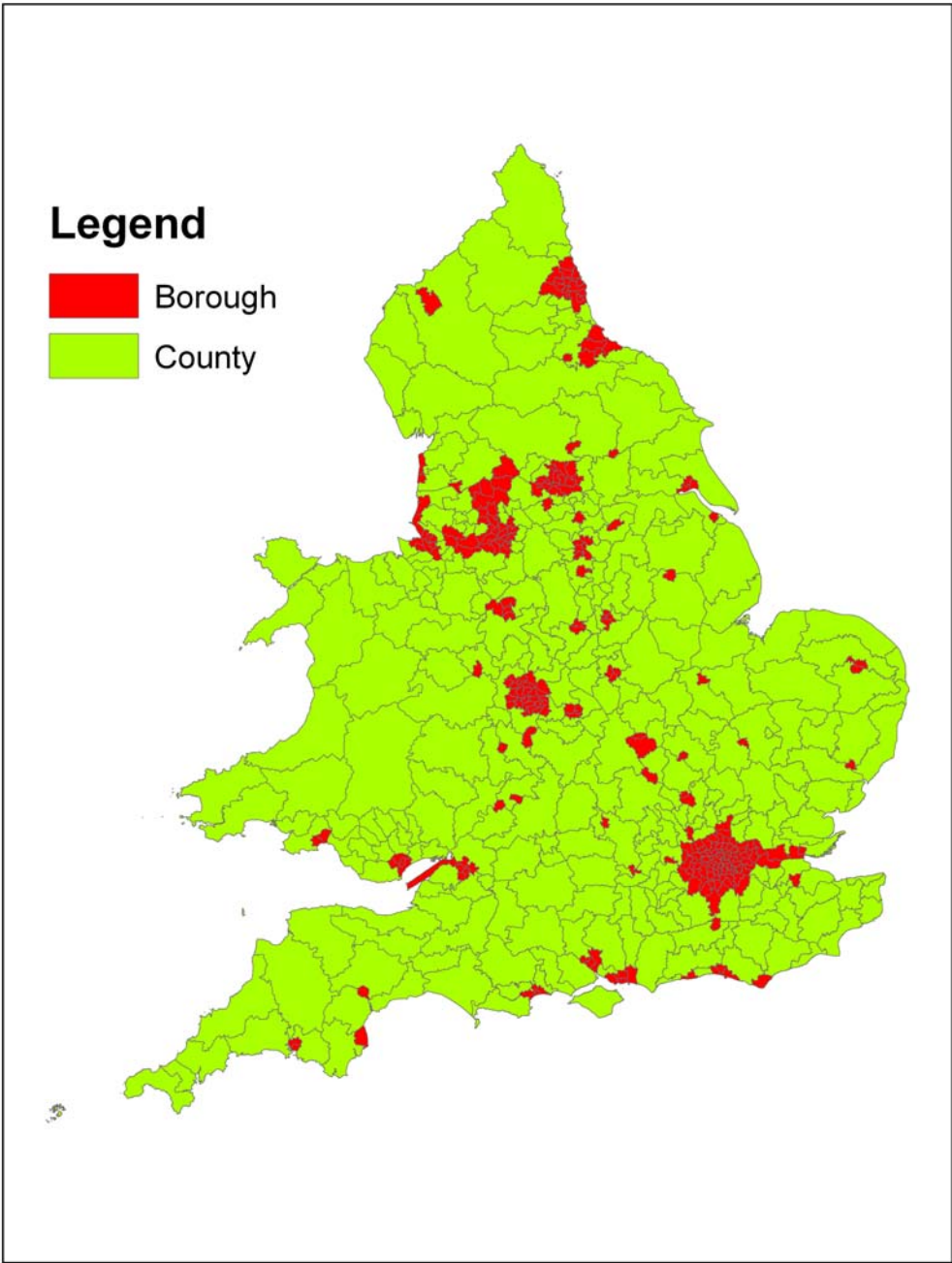
## 8 Conclusion

- 8.1 This note has suggested a classification of Parliamentary Constituencies in England and Wales using the approach to classifying local authorities in England.<sup>9</sup> The classification might be useful in any assessment of the designation of constituencies and in the analysis of rural voting behaviour.

<sup>9</sup> See: [http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/rural\\_resd/rural\\_definition.asp](http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/rural_resd/rural_definition.asp)

**Annex 1 Map 1**

**The Boundary Commission Designation of Parliamentary Constituencies  
in England and Wales**



## Annex 1 Map 2

### A Classification of Parliamentary Constituencies According to Rural/Urban Type

