



At a seminar on 2 May 2006 at which the RERC research on strategic commuting flows was presented, Professor David Brown of Cornell University, New York provided reaction from a cross Atlantic perspective. This is his note of his words.

Comments on Rural Commuting Briefing

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- 1 The theme that cuts across these three papers is that there is a high volume of commuting involving rural origins and destinations and these commuting streams are complex (rural-urban, urban-rural, rural-rural). There is also intriguing evidence in Martin Frost's paper that the volume of rural commuting has increased substantially from 1981. These statistical patterns are an indicator of how **diverse** rural UK is.
- 2 One implication of diversity is that policy must account for variability among places, e.g., one size fits all policies will not be effective. These commuting data also demonstrate very effectively the utility of DEFRA's new **rural definition** as a policy targeting tool.
- 3 How should information on the volume and complexity of rural commuting be considered from a policy perspective? As social indicators, do they portray problems, challenges and/or opportunities? In his introduction, John Shepherd characterized commuting as a proxy for the "geographic nature of social and economic networks." If one agrees with this, what is the wider meaning of commuting (and geographically constituted networks) for:
 - the changing nature of rural work
 - work-home relationships (trip chaining, spousal stress, etc)
 - local civic participation and community solidarity
 - environment, energy dependence, pollution

does more extensive rural-based commuting affect the viability of rural businesses?

4 A related question is what is the interrelationship between commuting and other social and economic processes, for example migration:

- is commuting a substitute for migration?
- where do working age urban to rural migrants work? [new study by Champion, Coombes, Brown]
- is the increased volume of urban to rural commuting shown by Martin Frost a predictor of more urban to rural migration in the future?

5 Even though rural commuting streams have become more extensive, all three papers, and especially Peter Bibby's, shows the continuing importance of locality, especially in the sparser rural locations.

6 As one DEFRA participant indicated, now that we have a description of the rural- based commuting streams, we need to know something about the commuters. What are their socio-economic and demographic characteristics, what jobs do they do, what is their household composition, etc.?

7 All three studies highlight the significance of "home work." What is the real significance of "home work?" What are people actually doing, and how do they bundle home work with other types of economic activity? How much of this is a consequence of agricultural diversification? Should farming be conflated with other types of home work? This is an important issue for future DEFRA supported research.

8 Some surprises from an American perspective:

- the high dependence of rural commuters on the private automobile was not expected in the UK where you have effective rural public transit [compared with the US, where it is almost totally absent]. What does this imply about the need for the public subsidy for rural transit? Is this a necessary public expenditure given the low dependence on public transit among rural workers?
- what other functions does rural public transit serve?
- comments raised during in the discussion concerning the higher cost of rural housing (vs urban housing) would not be expected in the US, where rural housing costs are quite a bit lower. In fact, low housing cost is a factor that promotes urban to rural migration in some regions.

- 9 My overall comment is that we need to consider these commuting patterns in a policy framework. Are they good or bad? What do they imply about the organization of social and economic life in rural areas? What can/should be done to enhance the patterns, to diminish them, to redirect them, etc.?

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