



Rt Hon Alun Michael MP

Speech to Rural Evidence Research Centre (RERC) Conference

'What Is Rural England For?'

Royal Geographical Society
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Introduction

For three reasons I am very pleased indeed to give this keynote speech today.

First, I have long held the very strong belief that we need the best possible evidence on which to base policy at the local level. This derives from my time as a Youth and Community worker in Cardiff. Some 25 years ago the collation of all socio-economic and health statistics on a small area basis in the Ely area of Cardiff gave us a much better picture of reality and made an enormous impact in terms of joined up work to tackle the real local issues.

It works. We analysed **all** information across agencies and indicators on top of the template of the census small area figures with the help of a researcher, Howard Williamson – now professor of Social Policy at the University of Glamorgan.

We didn't wait for an academic treatise to be produced two years later. We worked together, in real time, and we applied the facts to our daily work.

It is the experience of such joined-up work that led me to press the case for taking an evidence-based approach to the development of public

policy down to the most local level as a member of the Committee on the Statistics Bill a few weeks ago.

Second, as the first Minister of State for Rural Affairs in the newly formed Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in 2001 it was clear to me that Defra needed an early boost in its evidence base on the rural economy and society. The setting up of the Rural Evidence Research Centre was an important part of this process.

I'm delighted that my team at that time is contributing significantly to your conference today – not only John Shepherd but also Tim Allan now at the Local Government Association, and Robin Mortimer at Defra – these are the unsung heroes of a revolution in research on rural Britain.

Third, on moving on from Defra to the DTI in 2005 it was apparent to me that the same approach needed to be applied to the wider debate on regional productivity, business development, affordable housing and the impact of climate change on the economy. We had persuaded the Regional Development Agencies that rural economies needed to be seen as part of the mainstream. The classification of local authorities by the level of their rural population was immensely helpful in giving a rural perspective to a wide range of other data that was not available at the most local level. Now we needed to go further and have a joined-up approach to the whole regional agenda.

Much progress has been made since the establishing of Defra in 2001 but there is a real need for a wider ranging discussion on policy for rural areas based on evidence rather than the usual polarised approaches. How can national policy best relate to the specific needs of rural areas? This is well summed up in the title of your conference today: 'What is Rural England For'? Having experience of the numerous different bodies that have an interest in rural England I think this is a brave question to ask – and it will be a very brave person who seeks to answer it!

The Need for Good Evidence

As I mentioned, I got an early appreciation of the value of statistics focused on well defined local areas. Some 30 years ago I was a community worker in the Ely area of west Cardiff, to which I referred to earlier. It was an area with a population of about 35,000 with considerable social problems and a desperate need of facilities and prospects for young people.

We thought we knew the area well but it was only when we undertook a major research project supported by the Welsh Office and analysed census and other data right down to the level of the most local area

statistics that we realised there were big variations within the area not just in the extent or ***intensity*** of the problems but also in the different mixes of ***types*** of problems.

There was no substitute for our personal experiences of problems associated with families and groups but this geographically detailed information was vital in order to provide the context, to argue for resources and to marshal and target our efforts on the different kinds of need. Without the evidence, personal experience would have counted for little and could have been misleading.

The same need for very localized information became clear when I became Minister for Rural Affairs in the later part of the foot and mouth disease outbreak in 2001. If anything the problem of a good evidence base was ***more*** acute at that stage because we lacked a detailed definition of what we meant by rural areas.

At that time there was an enormous amount of statistical information about animals and plants but not about people. And while the impact on farmers and their families was enormous, there were at least networks which kicked in whereas other rural businesses – from tourism to manufacturing - which could not trade because of the restrictions were largely invisible as were the impacts on their families.

The accepted definition of “rural” at the time was not well based in localities because it was based on the whole local authority level or wards that often contained a wide range of different social and economic characteristics. We could not identify, for example, small rural towns, villages and hamlets which were the natural focus for the delivery of policies on such matters as access to services, rural transport, rural businesses and housing.

The idea of ‘rural proofing’ in particular could not work and would not be supported by other Departments without an agreed and valid definition of what we meant by ‘rural’.

Better Evidence based on a New Definition of ‘Rural’

This is where the new rural definition for England and Wales comes in which, via the use of Geographic Information Systems, it is built up in incredible detail from addresses of individual households which are built up statistically into the different types of rural settlement. This was a major breakthrough and we have much to thank John Shepherd at Birkbeck College and his colleague Peter Bibby at the University of Sheffield

This definition opened up all the riches of the census to rural analysis in a way we were not able to do before and which has vastly improved our understanding of the way rural areas work in relation to the economy and society as a whole.

I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that the new rural definition has transformed the way we think about rural areas.

The new rural definition was launched in Defra's Rural Strategy of 2004 and the very useful Rural-Urban Classification of Local Authorities came at my instigation about a year later. I recall with some pleasure two meetings I had regarding the rural definition and the interpretation of it. One was with the National Statistician no less to decide whether we would use the term 'remote' or 'sparse' for those census areas that had very low densities of population. In entomological terms it was a fascinating hour or so. The National Statistician argued for 'Remote' whilst John Shepherd was in the 'Sparse' corner. The arguments were strong on both sides but I think we were right to go with 'Sparse'.

Another discussion concerned the even more serious matter of the impact of distance on individuals and families. My concern was that this should not be looked at only in simple geographical terms. Distance or access must relate to the particular resources of households and this could mean that you could be located within a few miles of a city centre – as in the former coal mining communities of Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire and Durham – with no car, no public transport and no family support and in reality be just as 'remote' from services as a family at the head of Teesdale, or in parts of Lincolnshire or in parts of Ceredigion. That is why, with the help of the Rural Evidence Research Centre we looked at the incomes of households within rural areas using the new rural definition and made a focus on 'rural disadvantage' a major role for the Commission for Rural Communities.

Another area in which the ability to 'drill down' to the most local level in rural areas has been researched on the vexed issue of the rationalisation of the Post Office network. Extensive research carried out by Defra using GIS, postcode information and the rural definition indicated which post offices were located in socially and economically 'fragile' rural areas – again using very sophisticated methods of geographical analysis - and where their loss would be felt most.

Again, all is not quite as it seems. I had always accepted the generalization that post offices are vital in rural communities where people without resources and transport of their own may be particularly vulnerable. But a dipstick of some villages in the East of England showed that many of the post offices were located in better off villages and **not** in the same localities as those without money or transport. It proved to me

the need for the fine grain of local analysis – a large rural area doesn't make sense "on average" any more than England makes sense "on average".

Finally, a 'cross government' example of the analysis of the situation in rural areas. Whilst I was at the DTI we used the local authority classification in research on the Annual Small Business Survey. This was done by Martin Wyn Griffiths and his team and was published about a year ago. You can find it on the website of what is now the Department for Business.

This research brought out some trends which have been very useful in considering policy for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises, especially those located in 'low productivity' rural areas. SMEs in rural areas tend to be smaller than in urban areas and many have no employees. They are more likely to be partnerships and family businesses with owners who have fewer qualifications. There are obvious implications for access to investment and longevity.

These findings were even clearer for rural businesses in lower productivity (i.e. more remote or 'peripheral') areas, such businesses were much less likely to use their profits to further social or environmental goals. Now, the extent to which these findings impact on the level of economic activity in these areas needs further analysis but the ability to look at the data in this way must be used to the full in order to set us on the right path.

Rurality – the Wider Issues

This brings us on to the big picture of what is happening in rural areas: an increasing and ageing population, migration of people from the cities to rural areas, a lack of affordable housing, more car based travel within rural areas and to the towns, decline in rural services and the need to improve the skills of young people and workers in some rural areas.

Thanks to extensive evidence collection and analysis we now know much more about these things but there are some areas – in relation to the numbers and needs of immigrant workers in the countryside for example – where there is an urgent need to improve the detail and timeliness of the evidence base.

Now, the big challenge is to join up the 'big picture' policies and see how the evidence can help us to get a more integrated set of policies for urban and rural development – i.e. 'national' development.

The 'big picture' issues for the future as I see it are

- climate change,
- land use
- and transport.

On *climate change* we must look at the impact of warming, together with pressure on water supplies, on economic activity in the countryside. I know these are major concerns for the Defra 'Horizon Scanning' team.

On *land use* we must look at ways in which we can meet the need for land for housing, infrastructure, environmental conservation and food security on a rational basis.

We must co-ordinate land use changes in ways that reduce the need for *travel* – especially travel by private car - and we can make a solid 'rural' contribution to meeting our carbon emissions targets.

Conclusion

The subject matter of your conference today touches on all these issues of the future of rural England i.e. understanding 'rural' productivity, small rural towns, employment and skills and rural communities.

It cannot be expected to deal with issues facing the agricultural sector.

Issues of landscape and conservation also have social and economic significance: they may be for other experts to tackle but the aim must be to integrate their work and yours.

This conference offers evidence-based perspectives on the major social and economic drivers of change that are affecting the vast majority of people living in the countryside.

It is only in the last five years that we have had really good evidence on the changing social and economic scene of rural areas. In the past our knowledge was confined to detailed statistics on forestry, livestock and commodities - not on people.

To conclude, I must stress the importance of the current rural definition in helping Government to focus in a concerted and nationally comparable way on the characteristics and needs of rural areas.

While it is not the only definition or approach that provides a useful perspective on what is happening in the countryside, it has been very important in enabling Government Departments, the regional bodies and all rural stakeholders to 'sing from the same hymn sheet'. The

consortium of government institutions who commissioned the definition and the Rural Evidence Research Centre who delivered it are to be congratulated for this and the rural evidence that has been delivered on the basis of it.

I wish you well for the rest of your meeting today.

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