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What IS Rural England For?
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What Has The RERC Done for Us?

Introduction

Thank you Alun for those kind opening remarks. I would like to respond by saying that it was a most rewarding experience for the RERC consortium to work for you and for officers in Defra's Rural Affairs Directorate. My aim in this short talk is to indicate how we went about our work and how that approach can contribute to a debate on policies for rural England.

I would like to assure you, too, that we have no intention of answering or even attempting to answer directly the question 'What Is Rural England For?' but given the nature of modern rurality it was just too good a title not to use for our conference. What I would suggest, however, is that amidst the very important concerns of the various interests associated with 'rural' including farming, open air leisure, conservation etc. and with government rural policy mostly focused on local issues, there could be a danger that the 'big picture' social and economic issues you spoke about might not get the synoptic and coherent attention they

deserve. The provision of relevant evidence on these issues we see as an important means of keeping them in the forefront of the policy debate.

Rural Population Growth

Before attempting to say in 15 minutes what the RERC has tried to achieve over the last four years I think it is useful to remind ourselves of the over-riding background to policy for rural areas over the next decade or so. It is, of course, the increase in population and its accompanying ageing. Between 2004 and 2029 (SLIDE 1) rural areas are projected to grow by just over 3 million persons or nearly half of total national projected growth in that period. Moreover the most rural areas according to the local authority classification will see a 2 million rise in the population of over 55's with the attendant implications of that for the provision of a range of services.

RERC Philosophy

In our response to the call from Defra to establish a Rural Evidence Research Centre we were very clear as to the path we would take and as to the sort of methodologies we would pursue. We said we would focus on contributing to the understanding of the consequences of the long term severing in rural areas of the relationship between land and employment and between home and work leading to the social and economic diversification of the countryside under conditions of counter-urbanization.

We said we would pursue a policy of **analytical open-ness** in that we were seeking to understand a society and economy that was in reality neither urban nor rural but, to varying degrees (and the word 'varying' is important here), integrated. We would, within the notion of the search for structural patterns that help guide broader policy development, recognise the **diversity** of the make up

of the rural domain including differences among areas, settlements, places of economic production and households as the main focii of analysis. We said we would have a concern with **social and economic variation** not only between but within rural localities and we also suggested that terms like 'peripherality' and 'exclusion/inclusion' might have very different **meanings** for different social groups. Our approach would also be mainly **quantitative** though we wished also to pursue studies of social capital and health in rural places contextualized by our quantitative findings.

Rural Places and Rural People

During the first 18 months of operation we were therefore mainly concerned with what we called '*rural places*' and this mainly, though not exclusively, revolved around applications of the new rural definition to two types of available data. One was **2001 Census** data, which was then coming onstream in large amounts. The other was the various national longitudinal and other important **national surveys** that had not hitherto had an explicit rural analytical dimension. Indeed, the rural definition itself was not just a response to the lack of a securely founded and well documented existing definition but to precisely the outworking of processes of social and economic severance previously described. The result was a definition which set aside the sorts of measures of occupational structure or services presence that had been used in previous approaches and focused instead on what we called the '*permanent or enduring*' features of rurality namely, the physical expression of the settlement pattern outside towns with more than 10,000 population (SLIDE 2).

This focus on a single dimension of the rural domain which could be cross-classified in terms of 'morphology' and 'sparsity' had the major advantage that it enabled analyses to be undertaken that were uncorrelated with the subject matter of real interest yet provided the dimension of settlement type and pattern

that are crucial to service delivery (SLIDE 3). This ability to isolate social and economic variables of interest is illustrated, for example, in work we undertook for the Commission for Rural Communities to provide a summary of the 'structured diversity' of rural areas to support the Commission's work in identifying the location and types of disadvantage in rural areas. This slide (SLIDE 4), for example, shows the elements of the rural typology that emerged; whilst this one (SLIDE 5) shows the ability to analyse the variation within the ward typologies in the different rural settlement types and the incidence of poverty incomes within social clusters. It shows, for example, that just 180 rural wards that could be labelled 'disadvantaged' have 32 percent of their inhabitants on low incomes.

Another main area of work in the first phase was to align certain important national **longitudinal** survey datasets with the appropriate rural settlement morphology_context values via the allocation of survey cases to census output areas. The data sets 'tagged' in this way include the ONS National Longitudinal Study, the Millennium Cohort Study, the 1970 British Cohort Study and the National Child Development Study. Work on tagging and analysing these data sets was undertaken for us by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the Institute of Education and the relevant 'look up' files are now in the public domain. Given the disproportionately high rate of ageing of the rural population the similar tagging of the somewhat more complex English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) was also a priority and this was undertaken with the help of the National Centre for Social Research, the analyses being done at Birkbeck. This very wide ranging data set on the work, health and financial circumstances of the same set of older households over nearly 10 years has yielded some significant rural_urban differences, for example, in relation to the actual and the perceived difficulty of accessing services. Rather more experimentally, the England and Wales element of the Europe-wide Time Use Survey 2000 was also coded and analysed for rural-urban differences. This showed, among other things, that rural dwellers spend more time on social activities than urban ones (are happier?) and

also, importantly that the use of 'settlement type' as a classifier was a much more more discriminating and interesting variable than crude population density.

There has, of course been a considerable amount of work undertaken by others using both the rural definition and the rural_urban classification of local authorities. Alun Michael has already mentioned the important paper by the Small Business Unit at the Department for Business on small businesses in rural areas with low productivity. Other examples include a wide array of evidence assembled by the CRC in its 'State of the Countryside' reports and by the various urban_rural comparisons undertaken by the Regional Development Agencies, Regional Assemblies, Regional Observatories and others. English heritage has also used the local authority classification to look at rural_urban differences in the distribution of cherished historical monuments. However, as a piece of work undertaken by the CRC last year also revealed, there is still a very patchy use of the rural definition and classification among central and local government departments and other agencies, a situation which it is to be hoped will be rectified not only for consistent rural proofing but also for strategic analyses of rural service provision.

Rural Networks

The second phase of our work was principally concerned with what we called **rural networks** by which we mean studies of the degree of economic integration in different parts of the rural domain and its relation to the rest of the space economy. This work takes its inspiration from **social network theory** and attempts to identify place to place differences in rural economy and society developed around ideas of social and economic linkages among households and businesses. This involves the analysis of a number of social and economic dimensions combined for particular rural places including:

- a **local economic role** represented as 'in situ' employment structure and growth, within small places
- the nature of **workplace attachment** identified as 'local' and 'non local' or geographically 'aligned ' and 'unaligned' links between home and work,
- degrees of **social mix** which potentially identifies differences between groups in terms of access to information on jobs and markets and sustainable community capacity, and finally
- **physical development** involving the way housing (including types of housing) and employment with different requirements for land are accommodated in different rural areas.

I would stress that our use of the term 'network analysis' refers to a set of approaches to data analysis rather than a strict theoretical or methodological framework. The view has to be **synoptic** or national in reach in order to encapsulate the diverse nature of rural areas and we must **infer** linkages and flows because that is what most of the data will currently allow. Work we have recently undertaken for the East of England Development Agency extends this approach to a wider range of data sets.

The approach and, I believe, something of the significance of this work can be indicated in two maps produced at different stages in the work of members of the RERC consortium. The first (SLIDE 6) could be taken to illustrate a transition from a concern with *place* as represented in the rural definition to a concern with the *function(s)* that places perform. It comes from work undertaken at the time of the development of the rural definition where some of the options for incorporating function into the definition were discussed in the Steering Group, but eventually rejected. On this slide GREEN indicates agriculture related businesses, RED tourism businesses and PURPLE other businesses. The depth of colour indicates a rural context comprising different

levels of population sparsity which should also be read as degree of population (or 'market') potential around a location.

Even at this rather broad level of classification of rural businesses we get a glimpse of the economic geography of the so-called 'rural economy' and from it we can begin to infer the sort of linkages and levels of integration on which a modern economy relies. Incidentally, both the rural context and the business data displayed on this map are from a single source namely, the Postcode Address File : the number of residential delivery points provides the information for density calculations whilst natural language processing of addresses provides information on business types. This work, along with other studies in similar vein which you will hear about next has been undertaken by Peter Bibby.

The next slide is, I believe, fundamental because it links an important and widely applied policy device – the Travel To Work Area – with the actual work travel patterns of residents of rural areas. The slide reveals an important fact about travel patterns within rural areas, namely the *diversity* of destinations workers reach from small rural places (SLIDE 7). The map shows the proportion of workers whose journey to work ends up in the Travel to Work Area to which they are assigned. The darker greens on the map refer to settlements where less than half the residents work in the TTWA to which they are assigned and the lighter greens indicate that less than a quarter do so. These green areas just happen to be rural places so if we were to say that some particular village is dependent on this town for employment purposes we are likely to be wrong if we use the TTWA as a guide. This is because the idea of a TTWA is based on the notion of degree of closure and depends, for its efficacy, upon the mass of work journeys within and on the periphery of towns. It doesn't do 'diversity'! Outside of the towns work journeys are to a very wide array of places. Differences in this ability, need or desire to reach a range of

employment opportunities hints at wider occupational and social networks and access to sources of information.

Conclusion

This has been just an indication of the way the RERC has attempted to make a contribution to understanding contemporary rural England over the last four years. It is only an indication which has tried to suggest what have been the main ideas and methodologies that produced the work. A better and fuller indication of this can be found on the RERC website: www.rerc.ac.uk which will include more work over the coming weeks and months. The four papers presented here today each in its own way builds on work begun by members of the RERC and takes the previous work further.

Peter Bibby suggests that the notion of 'economic integration' within the rural domain is a more fruitful way to understand 'two-speed economies' and suggests that recent attempts to measure rural productivity could be considered to measure neither 'rural' nor 'productivity in the sense that policy makers have sometimes interpreted these concepts taken together.

Tony Champion begins the task of identifying what we mean by 'market towns' not in the sense of identifying places for grants to pedestrianise streets or to select beacons of best town development practice (important though these activities are), but to unravel the determinants of small town growth as a prelude to understanding the strategic significance of rural towns in meeting the challenges of accommodating population growth within a context of sustainable development.

Anne Green this afternoon will then look at the range of evidence open to us in understanding labour market policy challenges in rural areas. In particular she looks at the supply and demand for labour skilled in ways that meet forecast changes in the employment structure of rural areas. She also looks at what evidence we have on the role of international labour migrants in rural areas and makes use of work done by the RERC to tag the ELSA data to examine labour market transitions among older people in the countryside.

Finally, *Ray Pahl* is the perfect speaker to keep us all awake in that critical period of the mid afternoon. Not sparing his blushes our work with Ray on social capital in small rural settlements was amongst some of the most enjoyable and rewarding work in which I have been involved and was the essential corrective to a research programme mostly involved with aggregative data. A major challenge for policy makers is, indeed, how to integrate the findings of quantitative (strategically focused) research with qualitative and experiential evidence in a the diverse geographical and social domain that is modern rural England.

John Shepherd

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