

## Finding work in rural areas: barriers and bridges

Comparatively little is known about economic disadvantage and social exclusion in rural areas. This study by Sarah Monk, Jessica Dunn and Maureen Fitzgerald of Anglia Polytechnic University and Ian Hodge of the University of Cambridge looked at barriers to labour market participation and bridges into employment in two contrasting rural labour markets in the east of England. The study consisted of a questionnaire survey together with in-depth interviews with people who were seeking work or surviving on low wages. The study found:

- f** While there were differences between the labour markets in the two areas, people faced the same sorts of problems in both areas and the responses of individuals to unemployment and disadvantage were remarkably similar.
- f** There were distinctly rural aspects to people's experiences and behaviour in both areas. These related particularly to transport, distance and a limited range of local opportunities.
- f** There was a mismatch between people's skills and the types of jobs available and a limited range of opportunities to match against individual requirements in terms of location, skills and working hours. Difficulties of getting between home and work and the costs of working, including transport and childcare, were all barriers to finding suitable employment.
- f** The seasonal nature of some rural employment caused problems for some, while gang labour in agriculture was poorly paid with poor working conditions.
- f** Sometimes employers' provision of housing or transport helped people get work although this could also trap people into unsatisfactory employment.
- f** Employers' behaviour and attitudes reinforced a barrier to finding work in rural areas. Some thought that people who had to travel long distances or depended on public transport were unreliable. Many employers did not formally advertise vacancies but relied on word of mouth, which was a constraint for those without local contacts.
- f** Reliance on informal local networks was one of the main ways of getting work, although this excluded recent incomers. For some, low incomes, personal circumstances and transport problems led to social exclusion. Others saw some degree of recourse to the informal economy as essential.

## Background

The study explored the extent to which aspects of living in rural areas constrained people's ability to participate in the labour market. Research took place in the Stowmarket area of Suffolk, an area with relatively good transport links, and the Horncastle area in Lincolnshire which is less well connected to transport networks. A questionnaire survey of 400 people who were unemployed or looking for alternative work was complemented by 60 in-depth interviews.

## A tale of two labour markets

There was a clear contrast between the two case study areas. The Horncastle area had a smaller range of job opportunities, lower pay, higher unemployment, more people moving out in search of work, more people moving in for cheap housing and was located within a Rural Development Area. In the Stowmarket area there was a greater range of job opportunities, higher pay (although still below the national average) and more expensive housing.

Because the sample was not drawn at random but targeted people facing disadvantage in the labour market, the results do not reflect the area as a whole. However, they provide important insights into the experience of disadvantage in the labour market. The questionnaire survey confirmed the picture of Horncastle as a less accessible, less affluent rural labour market with more limited job opportunities in terms not only of numbers of jobs but also their type and quality, pay and level of skills required, compared with Stowmarket. It also suggested a more close-knit community, where incomers find it harder to tap into local job networks.

## Barriers and bridges to finding employment

The in-depth interviews focused on people's work histories, experiences of job search and spells of unemployment. In addition to difficulties involving personal circumstances, such as age and health, four major sets of constraints emerged, all of which had a specifically rural dimension. Interviewees had tried to overcome these in various ways, but had not always been successful in the short or long term.

### *Mismatch between skills and available jobs*

A lack of qualifications or skills, possession of inappropriate skills and being over-qualified were all barriers to finding work. Many people lacked the skills necessary for the jobs that were available. Often

skills and experience related to agriculture or other manual work so that when people lost their job they were at a disadvantage.

But other people were over-qualified for the types of jobs that were available locally. The problem seemed to be one of a mismatch between skills and available jobs, not simply a lack of skills.

Training can lead to employment, but many unemployed people or those on low incomes could not afford to travel in order to attend training courses. There was also the problem of what type of training to undertake.

What do you train as, do you train as a secretary, do you train as a driver, do you train as a bricklayer? When there's bricklayers out of work? There's no guarantee there's a job at the end of it, that's the thing. (Don, Lincs)

Some had low education levels, so that they felt unable to benefit from training schemes.

... you now have to have certificates and licences and things like this ... I am not what you call very well educated ... if there's any paperwork and things like that involved, I have no hope. (John, Lincs)

For some people self-employment offered an escape from unemployment, a way of finding full-time work, expectations of higher income and the opportunity to be their own boss. However, it did not always work out.

### *Transport problems*

Transport problems affect many aspects of rural life. Where settlements are dispersed and populations are sparse, both jobs and homes are scattered. Frequently people could not get to work because they did not have access to a car and public transport was inadequate or non-existent. Others mentioned the vicious circle of needing a job in order to afford a car.

So I was in a bit of a catch-22 situation, I couldn't get a job, I couldn't get a car until I got a job, and I couldn't get a job until I got a car. (Andrew, Lincs)

Some firms provided a works bus which offered people a solution to a lack of transport. However, this limited people's range of job opportunities and led to dependence on an employer. Reliance on lifts was another strategy but it was often problematic.

### **Employers' behaviour and attitudes**

One of the commonest methods of gaining a job was through word of mouth and many employers did not formally advertise vacancies. Incomers to the area were thus at a disadvantage because they could not readily tap into local networks of information. In addition, many mentioned that they felt they were perceived by potential employers as 'foreigners'.

I would use the word mild xenophobia really.  
(Gareth, Lincs)

Employers' attitudes also sometimes served to exacerbate the transport problem. In some cases, people felt that they lost the chance of employment because they were considered potentially unreliable by employers if they had no car and had to rely on public transport. Other employers based their recruitment decisions on how far away people lived.

I phoned one firm up on the off-chance, which is, what, 12 miles from here. They said 'well, we haven't got anything at the moment, where do you live?' I told him, 'oh how far's that?' I said 12 maybe 15 miles, 'oh, you live too far away' he said. (Kelvin, Suffolk)

Many people attributed successful job search to word of mouth through local contacts and networks.

I finished on the Friday ... But somebody came into the workshops on the Friday afternoon and said 'Are you George? I'm Paul'. He said: 'I've heard an awful lot about you, you seem just the fellow I want.'  
(George, Suffolk)

Formal job search through the Job Centre was one way into employment, but many people expressed dissatisfaction with this route because not all jobs are notified to Job Centres, and for some people they are difficult to reach without transport.

### **Costs of labour market participation**

Other respondents were unable to get to the stage of even looking for employment. The low level of wages on offer presented problems for those who faced significant costs of participating. For many people, employment in a low-paid job was simply not worth their while. This particularly affected people with childcare problems. They would have had to earn significantly more than any of the jobs on offer in the local areas in order to be able to afford childcare.

Ways of overcoming childcare constraints included finding work to fit around a partner's hours, informal arrangements with friends or relatives and home-working.

The 'benefits trap' prevented other people from taking low-paid work.

The problem of low wages and seasonal or casual job opportunities also affected labour market participation if the distances travelled were high, because this increased the costs of travel as well as the difficulties of relying on public transport. Some people therefore took very low paid or unsatisfactory work simply because it was local.

So that was one of the reasons why I had to take a low paid job ... because I'm saving that little money, I'm actually having that in my pocket, although I'm bringing a lot less home I'm actually no worse off.  
(Sammy, Suffolk)

### **Tied housing, gang work, seasonality**

Tied housing is a feature of some forms of rural employment. This constrained people's ability to change their jobs despite poor working conditions or pay levels, because they would lose their home as well as their job.

Yeah, but that is one problem with a tied house, you tend to go from one to another. Because there's no options. (Sam, Suffolk)

Gang work and the casualisation of traditional farm work is another feature of certain sectors in agriculture. Conditions of work on the gangs are particularly harsh.

Gangs you know ... did the donkey work, the cutting of the broccoli, the cutting of the leeks, you know, preparing them for the supermarkets. They were on piece work, that rate of pay went up and down so much it was unbelievable ... they had absolutely no rights whatsoever ... they could never guarantee their job security even though they were working there full time. They didn't give you holiday pay, there's no sick pay. (Andrew, Lincs)

The seasonal nature of agricultural work is a traditional problem in rural areas. In Lincolnshire the tourist industry also created seasonal unemployment, not only for those working in the resorts but also maintenance and development work which had to take place out of season.

### Other ways of coping

A range of money management strategies and changes in habits in response to unemployment or a fall in household income were identified. In some cases this led to a withdrawal from the local community and social exclusion.

Informal support networks such as friends or family helped with childcare and transport problems to allow some people to work. Recourse to the informal economy also helped some people.

### Policy implications

The study revealed complex interrelationships between apparently different problems, for example, employment, transport, housing, child care. For individuals, employment problems may be difficult to resolve due to the lack of transport or childcare and people may accept poor working conditions due to housing problems. Understanding the underlying causes depends on a comprehensive analysis of the sets of circumstances faced by the individuals involved. Attempts to tackle problems of rural accessibility may conflict with other government policies designed to reduce dependence on the car. There is also a danger that because the most disadvantaged rural residents are dispersed and difficult to identify, area- or community-based initiatives will be unable to meet their complex needs.

### About the study

The study was undertaken by Sarah Monk, Jessica Dunn and Maureen Fitzgerald of the Geography Department at Anglia Polytechnic University and Ian Hodge of the Department of Land Economy, University of Cambridge. Four main methods were used: analysis of published statistics and surveys; interviews with people with experience of local economic and social issues; a questionnaire survey of 200 people and in-depth interviews with 30 people in each case study area. The method used to achieve the questionnaire sample was innovative in its application to rural areas. It sought to identify those who were disadvantaged in the labour market in some way, leading to low incomes and potential social exclusion. While this makes generalisation difficult, the study focuses on disadvantaged people for whom rural living is problematic. The quotations are taken verbatim from the in-depth interviews but names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

### How to get further information

The full report, **Finding work in rural areas: Bridges and barriers** by Sarah Monk, Jessica Dunn, Maureen Fitzgerald and Ian Hodge, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 902633 47 4, price £12.95 plus £2 p&p).