

foundations

Exclusive countryside? Social inclusion and regeneration in rural areas

Many rural areas are becoming increasingly exclusive, in the sense that only better-off people can afford to live there. Richer people are moving in and poorer people are moving out, so that evidence of high and rising incomes in rural areas requires careful interpretation. Similar proportions of people experience disadvantage and exclusion in rural areas, but their interests are often overlooked because inequalities are obscured by an uncritical notion of consensual, idyllic rural communities. The Foundation's Action in Rural Areas programme has explored issues of social inclusion and regeneration in a wide variety of rural areas throughout Britain, finding that rural areas are changing rapidly and unevenly under a number of pressures, with divergent consequences for different places and different social groups. These detailed findings suggest a number of specific ways in which policy can be improved. These are crucial to the Government in its pursuit of its vision of a living, working countryside in which not only the environment but also the life-chances of residents are safeguarded.

Key points to underpin rural policy:

- Processes of social exclusion operate widely in rural Britain - with one in three people in rural Britain experiencing poverty at some time between 1990-96 - even though these processes may not be as visible as in urban areas. This lack of visibility in itself makes social exclusion harder to address.
- Those experiencing social exclusion in rural areas are dispersed amongst apparent affluence, rather than concentrated together in problem areas. Area-based intervention may therefore be insufficient.
- While community development and empowerment are required to address social exclusion in rural Britain, standard area regeneration initiatives may only reach the already powerful. Moreover, top-down agendas, requirements for partnership working, competitive bidding regimes and short-term funding hinder initiative. New approaches to capacity-building are therefore required to adapt to rural contexts.
- Transport has emerged from all the studies as a major barrier to social inclusion in rural areas. People without a car, or without access to one, have more difficulty finding a job or accessing services. A policy of reducing car ownership is likely to make this situation worse.
- Progressive 'gentrification' of rural England is projected by the studies to continue, as wealthier households outbid poorer groups for scarce housing, and social exclusion thus becomes spatial exclusion. Planning for, and resourcing, affordable housing provision is fundamental to the economic, social and cultural sustainability of rural communities and to the life-chances of many people.

Changes in rural areas

Rural areas of Britain are changing rapidly in the face of globalisation, economic restructuring, migration, and other social and policy changes. These forces have different implications for different areas and different social groups. Many rural areas are now growing faster than urban districts, while some still experience decline: the economic and social processes underlying these diverse trends are not well understood, but one key element is the increasing penetration of local markets by global forces. The declining importance of agriculture and other traditional activities has been more than offset in rural areas by the growth of the service sector. Around 73 per cent of jobs in rural Britain are now in services, compared with 60 per cent in 1981. Rural areas have thus shared in a general shift to a service-based economy in which the information and knowledge-based industries play an increasing role, bringing both opportunities and threats.

Migration flows are critical in determining rural population levels and, while some rural areas continue to lose population, in most parts people are moving into rural areas. Between 1971-1996 the population of rural England grew by 24 per cent, compared with 6 per cent across England as a whole. Similar trends applied in Scotland, where between 1981-91 the rural population increased by 3.5 per cent (compared with a 1.4 per cent fall in the total Scottish population). This migration tends to be highly socially selective. 'Gentrification' has been evident in many areas of rural Britain, as better-off people have migrated into the countryside and displaced the less affluent, primarily through competition for scarce housing.

Rural policies are changing in response to these forces, but wider policies (especially macro-economic and social policies) also have pervasive impacts upon rural areas, even though these effects may not be at the forefront of policy-makers' minds. European policies are particularly important in relation to agriculture and rural development, and these are expected to place increasing emphasis on diversification and on area-based partnerships. In Britain, a Cabinet Office report recently argued that rural policy is still attuned to the post-war circumstances of 1947 and called for a radical updating to encourage diversification of rural economies, social inclusion and the building of social capital.

Tackling social exclusion

A slightly lower proportion of people experience low incomes in rural areas than urban, but prosperity is far from universal in rural Britain. One-third of people in rural areas had at least one spell where their income fell below half mean income during 1991-96, and gross income inequalities intensified over this period. Analysis of the British Household Panel Survey shows the chances of escaping from low income are similar in both rural and urban areas.

The main axes of inequality in rural Britain are social class, gender and age. The principal groups affected by exclusion are older people, young people, low-paid people in work, self-employed people, people detached from labour markets, and women. Ethnicity is less apparent as an axis of exclusion in rural areas, largely due to the small number of rural residents from minority ethnic communities, but this subject is under-researched. As in urban areas, loss of job, marital breakdown, and changes in the composition of the family or household can trigger poverty and exclusion, but these have less salience in rural areas. Other factors which are more important in rural than urban areas include low pay, inadequate pensions, poverty in self-employment, lower levels of benefit uptake, and fear of stigma in small communities.

The key issues for policy may therefore be summarised as follows:

- the hidden and dispersed nature of poverty in rural areas, which makes it hard to address through area-based policies or community development;
- a high incidence of poverty among older households, often in private housing;
- the low take-up of benefits, reflecting inaccessible advice and information services, differing perceptions of poverty, and a culture of independence;
- low pay, especially in small workplaces which dominate rural economies and so may trap people in a lifetime of low-paid work;
- the detachment from labour markets of older people in the workforce;
- the high incidence of poverty among self-employed people in rural areas;
- a lack of transport, childcare, and affordable housing which compounds inequality;

- the low priority given by policy-makers to exclusion in rural Britain.

Poverty and social exclusion are not confined to the most visibly poor council estates, nor even to the cities and towns, but bear on the lives of a substantial minority of those in rural Britain. It is important that their needs and their life-chances are not overlooked by the Government and its agencies. Policy measures which could address social exclusion in rural areas include:

- **'Rural exclusion-proofing'**: There would be merit in subjecting all existing and proposed policies and practices to audit in respect of their likely impact on people on low incomes in rural areas ('rural exclusion-proofing'). This has parallels with the application of equal opportunities audits and social impact statements.
- **Tackling low pay**: People in rural areas are more likely to suffer persistent low pay. The introduction of the National Minimum Wage will help many, but policies must also address the difficulty many employees in small rural workplaces face in escaping low pay to better paid jobs. As well as training, policies must therefore address the demand side of labour markets.
- **Integration into work**: Most of those on low incomes are not in employment, even when one considers only those of working age. Addressing these people's low incomes will require their integration into paid employment; this confirms the importance of extending Welfare to Work to older workers, and combining this with related policy initiatives directed at transport, childcare provision and eldercare services.
- **Increasing benefit take-up**: The majority of those with low incomes in rural Britain experience poverty for relatively short spells, during which the levels of benefit and other welfare payments are critical in assisting them to cope. Yet there is evidence of a lower take-up of welfare entitlements in rural areas, for several reasons (lack of advice and information, cultural barriers, housing tenure, stigma). Maintaining adequate levels of benefits is of major importance to households during these short spells, as will be better access to information and advice about benefit entitlements.

- **Raising pensions**: Poverty in rural areas is most prevalent among older people. The single most effective measure to address poverty in rural Britain would be an increase in the level of the state pension. Special efforts are required to reach people relying only on state pensions and unaware or unconvinced of their other entitlements.
- **Joined-up policies**: There is a need for policies to offer a multi-faceted, integrated response to these complex problems, and for appropriate mechanisms of government to be established at all levels, perhaps within the framework of Community Planning.

Labour market and transport

The barriers to labour market participation identified in these studies appear qualitatively different to those in urban areas. Particularly significant were: the divisive effects of 'word of mouth' and informal methods of recruitment and job search; the fundamental importance of transport; and the mismatch between skills and the available jobs. Public transport is unable to provide a comprehensive solution to problems of accessibility, and cars are essential. But this means that people who, for whatever reason, are unable to drive become even more restricted by lack of access.

Barriers to finding employment:

- structure of local labour markets – mismatches between jobs and skills;
- employers' behaviour and attitudes;
- accessibility between home and workplace;
- the costs of participating in the labour market;
- specifically rural issues – tied housing, gang labour and seasonality.

Bridges to labour market participation:

- linking into local networks rather than formal job search strategies;
- self-employment;
- transport solutions;
- training, although this was often hard to access in the locality;
- childcare solutions;
- support networks and the informal economy.

Possible ways of addressing these obstacles to labour market integration include:

- **Economic development:** Problems of low wages, low skills and detachment from paid employment arise from an insufficient demand for labour in many rural areas. More energetic and imaginative approaches to rural economic development are required.
- **Jobs outreach:** More personal advisers could be engaged in outreach work in rural areas, taking a proactive role in matching available jobs to the people registered with them.
- **Training through local firms:** Local firms, perhaps linked to distant colleges, could be used as the focus for training provision. Training packages could be tailored to local firms, where training in more generic skills could also occur rather than in a 'classroom'.
- **Childcare:** Innovative ways of offering formal childcare provision in dispersed communities are essential to women's integration into paid work. One option might be to extend the use of primary school facilities as one-stop family support centres.
- **Linking incomers into networks:** For example, work experience and training based in local firms would provide contact with employers and people who are in work. For their children, school-based work experience or employment 'compacts' might be effective.
- **Grants for transport or childcare:** The Government should offer grants to help buy a car, or help with tax and insurance, on the offer of work. Grants for childcare might be made in similar circumstances. These would overcome real obstacles to integration into paid work, and would result in benefit savings and taxes.
- **Hypothecation of fuel duty revenues from rural areas:** Fuel duties levied in rural areas might be allocated to rural transport measures (eg. subsidised taxis for targeted groups, dial-a-ride schemes, means-tested help with tax and insurance, and community transport) or to general rural sustainability measures, such as the provision of mobile services and the retention of small shops and schools.

Housing

A considerable body of research reveals a severe shortage of low cost housing in many rural areas, which is recognised as not only a major contributor to rural disadvantage, but also as the principal engine of social change in rural Britain. This is particularly important in excluding indigenous younger households on low incomes, unable to own their own property and with limited opportunities available in the rental market. But - although the provision of affordable housing opportunities is crucial to the sustainability of a living, working and inclusive countryside - levels of investment in social housing in rural areas continue to be low, and few opportunities exist in the private rented sector.

The Government should recognise the central role of housing markets as the motor of social change and of social and spatial exclusion in rural England. This recognition should lead to a more integrated approach, involving both greater investment in affordable rural housing and modifications to planning policies, which places the provision of affordable housing at the heart of policies which pursue sustainable development and social inclusion.

Young people

Two particularly striking findings emerged from this programme's studies of young people in rural areas. The first is that young people from rural areas become integrated into one of two quite separate labour markets – the national (distant, well-paid, with career opportunities) and the local (poorly paid, insecure, unrewarding and with fewer prospects). Education, and of course social class, are the elements which allow some young people to access national job opportunities, in the same way as those from urban areas. But for those whose lack of educational credentials traps them within local labour markets, further education and training are much less available than for their counterparts in towns, and their life-chances are reduced.

The second key point is the interplay between transport, employment and housing. Young people in rural areas, earning low wages, must have a car to get to work, but this together with the shortage of affordable housing leaves them unable to afford to live independently. There is also an initial problem:

people need a job in order to afford a car, but need a car to secure a job; help might well be given at this crucial stage in the youth transition.

Policy suggestions relating to young people therefore include the following:

- **A Youth Unit:** There is no systematic approach to working with young people in rural areas, or elsewhere. A Youth Unit, as recommended by the Social Exclusion Unit, should be given responsibility for developing a clearer strategy for young people in rural areas and for co-ordination of services at national and local levels.
- **Improved access to further education and training:** A more flexible implementation of the New Deal should build on innovations developed in Scotland. One possibility would be a new option in which work experience with small employers unable to provide training is combined with more general education or training in alternative settings.
- **Increasing mobility:** Driving licences are vital, and driving lessons should be provided either at school or through the New Deal. Schemes that offer some formalised system of arranging lifts may constitute another response.
- **A voice for young people:** Young people are often viewed as a threat by other members of rural communities, and tend to be viewed as 'apart'. Efforts should be made to include young people in activities and in decisions, so giving them a voice and a space.

Regeneration, partnerships and rural development

Partnership working has become established as a significant vehicle for the implementation of rural development policy in Britain, as elsewhere in the European Union. Partnerships involving the public, private and voluntary sectors are expected to allow the voices of local communities to be heard and to foster a sense of shared objectives. In practice, neither local communities nor the private sector have often been successfully involved in rural areas, and the public sector has tended to dominate the agendas and working of rural partnerships. Very few emerge organically from the grassroots. While some have been successful,

external agendas, formal requirements for partnership working, competitive bidding regimes, short-term funding and existing power structures have often limited the effectiveness of rural regeneration initiatives. Instead, policies must be formulated, implemented and managed to facilitate local people to use their own creativity and talents.

If area-based partnerships are to continue as the preferred mode of delivery, rural policy needs to address the following key issues:

- **Top-down agendas:** Requirements placed on partnerships by programmes and funding bodies must be modified to allow flexibility to address a place's specific needs, and to ease the development of effective partnership working. Local initiatives must be allowed the room to 'grow' and find their own ways.
- **Partnership-poor areas:** Many partnerships are formed in response to competitions for limited funding, and this is leading to a very uneven spread of regeneration initiatives. Direct intervention by local government or development agencies may be required to engender a more widespread capacity for regeneration initiatives and effective partnership working in all areas. This does not mean imposing an external agenda.
- **Sustainability:** Partnerships need longer lead-times, start-up funding and a sufficient lifetime to allow for the development of effective working practices and capacity-building, if there is to be a chance of continued regeneration beyond the funding period. Most will not be self-sustaining, although some of their lessons may be 'mainstreamed'.
- **Training:** More training is needed to allow all partners to contribute effectively, especially voluntary and community sector partners.
- **Promote social inclusion:** The greatest challenge emerging from these experiences of rural development derives from the inequalities *within* each community of place, and especially from the unequal capacity of individuals to participate and benefit from area-based initiatives. The watchword must be 'who is being empowered?'
- **Legitimacy and accountability:** Direct representation of the full spectrum of interests is rare and there is often little local accountability. Novel

ways of ensuring participation should be tested to see if these could overcome the barriers of distance, compliance and deference which exist in many small communities.

- **Long-term commitment:** Ensure a long-term commitment to sustainable regeneration at all levels of government. Provide a strong ministerial lead, regional co-ordination and visionary local leadership to create: co-operation between departments and agencies; effective partnerships; policy integration at the local level; links between funding streams; and consistency in community involvement and consultation.

It is clear that policies required to promote social inclusion and regeneration in rural Britain go well beyond narrow 'rural policy' and touch on many departments of government at all levels, posing challenges for the mechanisms of 'joined-up government'. Nevertheless, this report shows that there are many specific and easily achievable actions which would improve the lives of many people in rural Britain, countering current tendencies towards an ever more exclusive countryside.

How to get further information

Material in this *Foundations* is drawn from the JRF's Action in Rural Areas programme.

The full report, **Exclusive countryside? Social inclusion and regeneration in rural Britain** by Mark Shucksmith, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 85935 056 9, price £12.95 plus £2 p&p). It provides an overview of the ten projects.

The following individual reports are also available from York Publishing Services. The details of *Findings* (four-page summaries) relating to each project are also given.

Polly Chapman, Euan Phimister, Mark Shucksmith, Richard Upward and Espe Vera-Toscano (1998), **Poverty and exclusion in rural Britain: The dynamics of low income and employment**, YPS, *Findings* Ref: 418

Sarah Monk, Jessica Dunn, Maureen Fitzgerald and Ian Hodge (1999), **Finding work in rural areas: Barriers and bridges**, YPS, *Findings* Ref: 9119

Julie Rugg and Anwen Jones (1999), **Getting a job, finding a home: Rural youth transitions**, The Policy Press, *Findings* Ref: N59

Stephen Pavis, Stephen Platt and Gill Hubbard (2000), **Young people in rural Scotland: Pathways to social inclusion and exclusion**, YPS, *Findings* Ref: 210

Fred Cartmel and Andy Furlong (2000), **Youth unemployment in rural areas**, YPS, *Findings* Ref: 220

Katy Bennett, Huw Beynon and Ray Hudson (2000), **Coalfields regeneration: Dealing with the consequences of industrial decline**, The Policy Press, *Findings* Ref: 450

Bill Edwards, Mark Goodwin, Simon Pemberton and Michael Woods (2000), **Partnership working in rural regeneration**, The Policy Press, *Findings* Ref: 039

Pamela Storey and Julia Brannen (2000), **Young people and transport in rural areas**, *Findings* Ref: 750

Natasha Mauthner, Lorna McKee and Monika Strell, **Changing work-family configurations in three rural communities**, research in progress

Mark Bevan, Stuart Cameron and Mike Coombes, **The role of social housing in rural areas**, research in progress