

Rural Vulnerability and Disadvantage

Statement 2019

Context

Despite being the most urban country within the UK, almost 90% of England's land area is categorised as rural ¹. Rural areas are home to 9.5 million people (2017) or 17% of the population ². More people live in small rural towns, villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings than live in Greater London.

England's rural communities are extremely diverse economically, environmentally and socially. They include, amongst others, remote and upland communities; coastal settlements; commuter villages and former mining communities. There is no doubt about the beauty and tranquillity of many rural areas but, as the former Commission for Rural Communities said "You can't eat the view". For those who are disadvantaged or vulnerable life in rural areas can be very difficult.

On the positive side, rural communities do often exhibit a certain strength and resilience with local authorities and the voluntary/ community sector providing much important support for those disadvantages or vulnerable. However, this is no excuse for central government's and other organisations' policies ignoring the existing and growing problems of rural residents.

How is vulnerability and disadvantage different in rural areas?

Even small rural communities typically have a wide ranging socio-economic mix of residents, with wealthy and poor households often immediate neighbours. This mix means that averaged statistics, such as average earnings, tend to disguise the real extent and severity of hidden disadvantage.

Certainly the romantic image of the 'rural idyll' is far from reality for many residents.

Another major difference between urban and rural areas is demographic. Rural areas tend to have proportionately far more people in the older age groups (24.5% are over 65 in predominantly rural areas compared to 17% in predominantly urban areas)². Rural areas also have proportionately fewer residents of working age. These differences are widening.

What are the 'rural' problems?

As identified in RSN's 'Rural Strategy' there are many issues contributing to rural vulnerability and disadvantage including difficulties in accessing facilities and services, higher cost of living, low local wages, lack of opportunity, and little political priority. These issues are interconnected in complex ways.

Access to services and facilities.

"Accessibility: - 'The rural challenge'" so wrote Professor Malcolm Moseley in 1979. 40 years on the difficulties in accessing facilities and services are yet more acute.

'Walk- to' rural facilities such as pubs, Post Offices and shops are continuing to decline. Other facilities and services (e.g. supermarkets; hospitals; GP surgeries; job centres; youth clubs; and council offices) are centralising in urban, often out-of-centre, locations which are hard for rural residents to get to, except by private car. For example, almost 30% of rural residents live more than 30 minutes' drive time from a major hospital. If travelling by public transport 40% live more than an hour away.

50 per cent of the rural population are living in areas that have the poorest accessibility to services (lowest 10 per cent decile) based on minimum travel times, compared with 2 per cent of the urban population.²

Unsurprisingly rural residents have to travel further. In 2015/16 people living in rural villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings travelled 10,159 miles on average, 95% further than in urban conurbations and 55% further than the average for England as a whole.²

At the same time rural public transport is continuing to contract. Between 2010-11 and 2017-18 there has been a net reduction of £172 million from supported bus services in England, a reduction of 46 per cent. In England some 290 services were reduced or withdrawn in 2017/18 alone.³

Many small rural communities have no bus service whatsoever and for others it is absolutely minimal. Such rural buses as still remain often run on radial routes to the nearest town/ city centre but other destinations are much more difficult or totally impossible to reach. Even where some limited public transport is available it very rarely runs at convenient times for accessing employment/training or attending fixed -time appointments such as doctor's appointments. Accordingly, if you are unable to drive you are dependent upon others to access employment, post-16 education/training; shops; medical facilities; and a host of other essential activities. Community transport and taxi alternatives, whilst helpful, are not without their drawbacks, not least their unsuitability for spontaneous or urgent trips. Older people cannot use their bus passes on community buses and even the expensive option of taxis is not necessarily always available. Whether by private car or other means, the additional cost for rural households of essential travel is very significant. For example, it is not unusual for 16-18 year olds to pay in excess of £500 p.a. just to access education.

The problems of poor rural accessibility and increased travel costs also impact on those trying to provide services to customers and clients including, notably, health and social care professionals; council services; and the voluntary sector.

Rural areas generally also suffer from inferior digital services compared to urban areas. In 2018 11% of rural premises could not get a 10 Mbps fixed line connection and 24% could not get a 30 Mbps (superfast broadband) connection. The equivalent urban figures are 1% and 3% respectively. Accessing the internet is also a very significant added financial burden in areas where no free wi-fi provision is available.⁴

With mobile provision, in 2018 a basic phone call could not be made inside 33% of rural premises on all four networks. A 4G connection could not be accessed on all four networks inside 58% of rural premises. The equivalent urban figures are 3% and 17% respectively. Two particular issues experienced with mobile provision are weak signal strength within many rural premises and the extent of network coverage in open countryside.⁴

Low wages and higher costs of living

The earned average wage in rural areas compared to the urban average is almost 9% lower.⁵ Rural residents also face higher costs:

- Housing costs. In 2017, the average lower quartile house price was 8.6 times the average lower quartile earnings in predominantly rural areas. This compares with 7.4 in predominantly urban areas (excluding London).²
- Fuel costs. Rural households must, on average, spend £1,620 to achieve an adequate standard of warmth compared to £1274 for urban households³ A higher percentage of rural households are fuel poor (about 14% in villages, hamlets and isolated areas compared to 11% in urban) and the average fuel poverty gap is twice the national average.⁶
- Travel. In 2017 average weekly transport costs for households in rural hamlets and isolated dwellings was around £131.80 (£57.50 higher than for urban areas) which accounted for 15.1% of their weekly disposable income.⁷

- Higher costs of service delivery. A diverse range of services cost more in rural areas. For example recent research showed that rural Councils paid 13% more for domiciliary social care.⁸ There are many other examples e.g. the higher grocery costs in village shops and commercial delivery firms charging supplements for remoter areas.

“People in rural areas typically need to spend 10–20 per cent more on everyday requirements than those in urban areas. The more remote the area, the greater these additional costs.”
(Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2010)⁹

Lack of opportunity

The challenges facing rural residents can have severe consequences for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged and can adversely affect social mobility.

- Educational choice and attainment. English and Maths GCSE results, using the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), show that for pupils in rural areas the attainment levels were lower for all decile bands compared with pupils in urban areas. (2016/17).²

As at 31 October 2016, 18 per cent of secondary schools in rural areas had received ‘Outstanding’ as the most recent inspection outcome, compared with 24 per cent of secondary schools in urban areas.²

Only 51% of rural students have access to a Further Education site within 30 minutes travel time using Public Transport/Walking compared to 93.6% in urban areas.²

- Rural areas typically offer far fewer employment and training opportunities which particularly disadvantages people who are unable to drive. In predominantly urban areas the proportion of the working age population with NVQ Level 4 or an equivalent qualification was 44.7 per cent compared with 35.4 per cent in predominantly rural areas (2015).²

The political dimension

In Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland (and in most of Europe similarly) rural areas receive special financial attention by their Governments. In England however, that is rarely the case and indeed rural areas receive far less government financial support for their services per head of population than do their urban counterparts. This unfairness is not helped by the lack of genuine rural proofing and the inadequate provision of meaningful statistics about the realities of rural living.

Far from being confined to Central Government, this lack of rural focus (or even the most cursory consideration of rural issues) is evident in plans and actions of many service providers in both the public and private sectors. Arguably this is because disadvantaged and vulnerable people in rural areas are geographically scattered and include such a diverse mix of demographic characteristics that they are not a cohesive lobbying group and are accordingly easy to ignore.

What is the RSN doing?

As the only organisation currently examining aspects of rural vulnerability and disadvantage on a regular basis we have developed a number of initiatives: -

- The Rural Services Network holds meetings involving rural local authorities to consider the situation (alongside Rural Health and Social Care) on two occasions a year.
- The group involving non-local authority rural organisations, The Rural Services Partnership, has formed a sub- group to consider rural vulnerability issues.

- We work with the Rural England Community Interest Company to operate a Rural Vulnerability Day in Parliament early each year and the RSN also acts as the Secretariat for a Parliamentary Group Meeting of MPs and Peers.
- We promote the sharing of information and best practice.
- We support the work of the National Rural Crime Network and the National Centre of Rural Health and Care. In the latter case we jointly provide the Rural Health and Care Alliance services to its members.

Ideas for tackling Rural Vulnerability and Disadvantage

Rural Vulnerability is a collective term that applies to an array of rural circumstances and situations which is perhaps best considered in the specific contexts of particular identified problems and issues.

Given the reduction and centralisation of public services, the ageing demographics of rural areas, and the challenges facing young people, the likelihood is that an increasing proportion of the rural population will become disadvantaged and/or vulnerable in the future.

The Utility Service Regulators Ofgem, Ofwat, and Ofcom are asking power, water and telecommunications companies to do work and set up systems to give consideration to both identify and assist their vulnerable customers and the phrase is also employed by the Financial Conduct Authority. The power and water industries employ a Priority Services Register situation to allow people to inform or register their difficulties so that companies are aware of their situation. Whilst recognising the need for confidentiality of the individual in many cases it is essential for private sector companies, local authorities and the voluntary sector to collaboratively address the challenges facing rural communities. We also think that people 'on the ground' such as Parish/Town Councils, voluntary groups and possibly Church Councils could have a more defined wider role.

In summary:-

- 1. It is our view that the number of people living in rural areas and who are particularly vulnerable/ disadvantaged is increasing markedly year- on- year and that immediate action is required.**
- 2. We have an established track record of working to improve the public financing of rural areas and support for the rural economy. (We operate through a small charge system with rural local authorities and we are dependent on these arrangements to highlight these issues and to put measures in place to try to tackle them)**
- 3. RSN has the experience, track-record, and the team to work with existing and new partners to address vulnerability and disadvantage. By supporting our existing work and working with our members we can provide a collective rural voice and dedicated resources to tackle rural vulnerability and disadvantage.**

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