

What will rural communities look like in the future?

Last year, the Cabinet Secretary's Advisory Group asked the Horizon Scanning Programme team and Defra to look into what external experts were saying about the future of rural communities. After a short period of desk-research, we decided to invite a number of leading industry, academic and voluntary-sector experts to a meeting with permanent secretaries and chief scientific advisors to explore and debate the potential opportunities and challenges that rural communities could face in the future.

It was clear from our initial research that rural communities face a range of interconnected opportunities and challenges. Some of these are specific to rural areas, such as dispersed populations and connectivity to a range of services (both physical and virtual). There are also issues that, whilst common to both rural and urban areas, have the potential to affect rural areas differently, such as ageing, population growth and affordable housing.

At the meeting, attendees discussed a number of these topics and the potential opportunities and threats they could bring in the future. Many of these are set out below. We've also included a number of 'visions for rural communities' that were put forward by attendees at the end of this post that we'd value your feedback on.

Demographic dynamics

Attendees discussed the potential future uncertainty around the balance between rural and urban population growth. Many attendees reflected that the resurgence of population growth in cities may reverse the long-term trend towards ruralisation. The 'life-cycle effect' (whereby young people move to cities for work and education, whilst older people and families move out to rural areas) was debated, and it was remarked that if the cycle continues, rural areas will age more rapidly than urban areas. This may have implications for public service delivery in rural communities. A number of attendees said that the 'liveability' of cities of the future would play a significant role in whether the cycle would continue.

Housing

The group discussed how the appeal of living in the countryside, coupled with the limited supply of housing would continue to put upward pressure on property prices. Attendees debated the viability of rural communities if this pressure was to continue, especially if the rural population grows older and wealthier. It was concluded that the provision of flexible, affordable housing in rural areas would continue to be a prominent issue in the future. Some participants felt that a 'one size fits all' approach to affordable housing would not be sufficient for the specific needs of those living in rural communities. Ideas of what a future rural scenario could look like were discussed, including the idea for mandating 'affordability' of property in perpetuity to ensure the property doesn't get sold on for a higher price and therefore adding to the pressure of providing more affordable housing.

Planning policy

A number of attendees suggested that in the future, national planning policy should be joined up and that it should be duty-bound to consider the unintended consequences that planning decisions might have for rural communities. The group debated the environmental impact of the Green Belt, and whether intensive farming and other forms of land use have a negative effect on biodiversity as well as on the appearance of the countryside. It was concluded that in the future, there may be value in exploring more sophisticated ways of assessing whether the planning system was meeting its strategic objectives.

Sustainable Services

New technologies could help to deliver public services in innovative and sustainable ways to rural communities, particularly in the healthcare sector. Attendees discussed how sharing back-office functions between public sector service providers in rural areas could help to bring down overall costs in the future. One attendee felt that strict performance benchmarks for public services could act as a barrier to rural provision, because they felt that in some instances, meeting targets in rural communities was harder to achieve than in cities. Attendees concluded with reflecting on whether in the future there would need to be a special 'rural communities' agreement between the provider and the population as to what should be an acceptable level of service.

Connecting Communities

Boosting physical and virtual connectivity was identified by attendees as an important way of supporting strong rural economies and public services. It was agreed that connectivity will be a far more significant in more isolated rural areas and that understanding these differences will be important for service provision and ensuring that rural communities are sustainable in the future. The discussion on this topic focused on two areas:

- Transport: attendees discussed how sparse populations make market-based delivery for transport more challenging, and the potential for local authorities and community transport schemes to help to fill gaps. Attendees concluded that transport services were important not just older people but for young workers and job seekers.
- Broadband: attendees felt that broadband, and particularly 3G and 4G communication is growing in importance for rural communities, especially in order to combat digital exclusion. Attendees agreed that improved infrastructure will provide additional opportunities to improve access to medical care in rural areas through telemedicine.

Dominant Cities

It was observed that public policy debates are currently focused on the role of cities in devolved decision-making, and 'city-regions' (encompassing cities and their rural hinterlands) as an appropriate level for governance to take place. However, a number of attendees felt that it is not

clear what the focus on cities and devolution means for rural areas, and debated the following questions:

- Will decisions made in cities, for instance on public services and infrastructure provision, reflect the needs of rural communities?
- What might devolution to cities mean for more remote rural areas that do not clearly fit into a 'city-region'?

A range of potential responses were discussed, including an equivalent to City Deals for rural areas, and centrally managed rural police forces.

Diverse economy

The group discussed the diversity of rural economies. Some rural areas are able to capitalise well on the attractiveness of the local countryside which leads to a vibrant tourism and recreation economy. Other areas may have to focus on a stronger manufacturing, agricultural and other sectors.

Whilst agriculture is not the largest sector in rural areas, attendees felt that it continues to be strategically important especially as agriculture is becoming more mechanised and efficient thanks to innovative technologies. Whilst advances in technology would likely increase productivity and food security, it could reduce people employed in this sector. It was noted that despite this, there are encouraging signs of spin-off companies capturing more of the value chain in rural areas.

Rural labour markets were identified as another key issue. The group discussed whether there is a trend towards a concentration of highly skilled, highly paid jobs in cities, meaning that a great number of rural inhabitants commute to cities for these jobs but locally-earned income may be lower. Some attendees felt that this model could impact on community resilience in the future, and more should be done now to encourage small businesses to base themselves in rural areas to boost rural economies.

Competing visions

At the heart of the discussions was a debate about the future role of rural communities. On one side was a view that rural areas are simply the commuter belt for cities, which will be the locus of economic dynamism. Another view was that rural areas should focus on environmental sustainability, and efficient and resilient food production. A third perspective was that rural areas ought to be competitive and diverse economies, including agriculture, manufacturing and tourism. All of these visions would have implications for the future of rural communities.

These 'visions' for rural areas imply the need for a 'trade-off' when it comes to decision-making. For example, one attendee identified that the [National Ecosystem Assessment](#) found that if you want to improve social outcomes it is best to plant trees in built-up areas, but to maximise

economic outcomes it would be better to plant them in sparsely populated upland areas. Attendees felt that it was important that these objectives be kept in mind by decision-makers.