



Commission for
Rural Communities
Tackling rural disadvantage

Rural Insights

assessing the views, concerns and priorities of rural England

Ipsos MORI



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Foreword by the Rural Advocate

As Rural Advocate and Chairman of the Commission for Rural Communities (and prior to that, the Countryside Agency) I have the challenge and privilege of listening to and representing the views and needs of people across rural England. As part of this, I have travelled widely around the country, meeting people in rural communities, in order to hear from them what they see as the main issues affecting their lives and their ideas for addressing them and to communicate those views back into the heart of government.

Another important way of understanding better the views of rural people and businesses is to draw on research into people's concerns and priorities. This report attempts to do that and, for the first time, uses as its basis the official definition of rural areas, announced in 2004. This allows both comparison of rural views with those of people in urban communities, as well as examination of differences between groups across rural England.


As is true for England as a whole, rural communities offer a wide spectrum of opinion. In addition, this report confirms that there is a clear rural dimension; there are perceptions and priorities in rural England that are significantly different from those reflected in the urban areas. In capturing people's experiences of recent changes in their communities, and their priorities for action now and in the future, the report will be essential not only in helping to inform the Commission's own work and priorities, but will also enable us to influence the work of others, within and outside government.

One major message to emerge from the report is the apparent lack of faith people in rural communities have in decision makers' understanding of local needs and circumstances, nationally and regionally - a perception held most strongly by those in the smallest rural settlements and in the sparsely populated areas.

There is a general concern about the wider disconnection of the public, rural and urban, from government at various levels. It is, I believe, one of the drivers of the current active policy debates on governance. As a result, there is an emerging policy agenda to find ways of increasing devolution of decision-making to more local, neighbourhood levels and for increasing the extent to which communities are consulted in key decisions which affect their lives and their local environment (e.g. those related to planning). It is my aim to ensure that rural communities across England benefit fully from the changes taking place. I want rural communities to feel that they have a voice and are listened to and that they have a real connection with national and regional decision-making.

Stuart J. Burgess

About the author



This digest of rural research has been prepared by Ipsos MORI's Dr Roger Mortimore on behalf of the Commission for Rural Communities. Dr Mortimore is Ipsos MORI's Senior Political Analyst. He joined MORI on completion of his DPhil at Oxford University in 1993, since when he has focused on opinion polling methodology and political research. He is a frequent writer and speaker on opinion research. He was co-author with Robert M Worcester of *Explaining Labour's Landslide* (1999), and of *Explaining Labour's Second Landslide* (2001), with Robert Worcester and Paul Baines of *Explaining Labour's Landslip* (2005), and with Dick Leonard of *Elections in Britain - A Voter's Guide* (5th edition, 2005), and co-editor with John Bartle and Simon Atkinson of *Political Communications: the General Election Campaign of 2001* (2002). He has also contributed numerous chapters and articles to other books and journals. Since 2003 he has been Journals Review Editor of the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, and is also a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties* and of the Advisory Panel for the Centre for Public Communication Research at the University of Bournemouth.

Executive Summary

Aims and scope of the report

- ▶ This report is an attempt to understand the perceptions and priorities of the people of “rural England”. It uses survey evidence, drawing principally on an Ipsos MORI survey for the Commission for Rural Communities conducted in February and March 2006. This work does not seek to identify a single rural perspective, rather to explore differences between different points of view, between the rural and urban publics and also between different groups within rural England.
- ▶ The first purpose of the report is to inform the work both of the Commission for Rural Communities and of other organisations (within and beyond government) whose actions influence the lives of rural people. Its second purpose is more technical – to assess the extent to which rurality (as a characteristic of where people live) matters in shaping their perceptions and priorities.
- ▶ The report uses the definition of rurality published by the Office of National Statistics in 2004 and now regarded as the standard classification for use by public sector bodies. This defines “rural” as comprising all settlements with a population of less than 10,000, subdivided into three categories based on settlement size (“small town & fringe”, “village” and “hamlets & isolated dwellings”); each of these, and the urban areas, are then sub-divided into “sparse” and “less sparse” areas on the basis of the population density of the surrounding area. Around a fifth of English adults live in rural areas and about 1.5% in “sparse” rather than “less sparse” areas.

What rural England is like

- ▶ Rural communities differ from urban England not merely in their physical geography, but also in the characteristics of the people who live there. Rural areas, especially villages and hamlets, have more residents in the professional and managerial classes and fewer from the working class. In sparse areas, the population is also a little older.
- ▶ Rural areas contain a somewhat different mix of industries and services from urban areas, to provide employment. Agriculture is the most distinctively rural employment sector, but, even where it is most significant (within the sparse hamlets), it accounts for only a fifth of jobs. Across rural Britain as a whole, several other sectors – wholesale and retail, health and social work, and education, for example – employ more people.
- ▶ People in rural areas are more likely than urbanites to rely on BBC local radio as an information source and less likely to watch Channel 5 for the same purpose. Readership of *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph* is higher than average, while that of most of the tabloids is lower.
- ▶ Adherence to the Anglican church is stronger in rural areas. Not only would we expect this to contribute in itself to a common outlook, but the Church can be an important unifying local institution and the focus of many community activities, especially in the villages.
- ▶ Community activities draw in a greater part of the population in rural areas than urban, more in villages and hamlets than in towns, and more in sparsely populated than in less sparse areas. Those living in sparse areas are also more “socio-politically active” than those in less sparse areas, and those in rural areas are more so than in urban areas. They are more likely to express their views, whether by meeting elected representatives, writing to editors or making speeches, more likely to be an active campaigner or fund-raiser and more likely to encourage other people to do the same.

How rural England thinks

- ▶ People in rural settlements seem to feel a stronger sense of community and shared local identity than those in large towns and cities, and greater levels of inter-personal trust. Rural people, especially those in the smaller settlements, also have a higher degree of attachment to their local area than do people in urban communities.
- ▶ Most people in England seem to be happy with life, with the area where they live, and are generally optimistic about the future, but this is particularly true of the majority of people in rural areas. Rural people have a positive assessment of the social, economic and environmental characteristics of their local areas. However, in economic terms, there is a distinction between the less sparse rural and sparse rural areas, with those in the latter being far less happy about their economic prospects than the rest of England.
- ▶ Across rural England, people do not seem to be happy about the changes they feel they are seeing in their communities (although this is also true in urban areas). The biggest recent changes they report locally are mostly ones they think are for the worse, not the better – whether they are asked about changes to “the kind of area you live in, and the way people here live and interact with each other”, to the overall prosperity of the area or to the surroundings or environment. Those living in the sparse areas take the most negative view of recent change, seeing damage to both the way people live and the local economy; in the less sparse areas, there is also a clear majority who feel that changes to the way of life have been for the worse; and both villages and hamlets stand out for the numbers who report perceptions of environmental damage.
- ▶ Reports of incomers moving in are among the most frequently mentioned perceived changes to the nature of communities in rural areas, especially in the sparse villages and hamlets (even though the turnover of population is, if anything, higher in urban areas). To many in rural communities, any influx of outsiders is clearly seen as a threat. Reports that people are increasingly keeping themselves to themselves, or that community spirit is breaking down, are also widespread.
- ▶ Loss of jobs is the most frequently mentioned economic change, but more so in sparse than in less sparse areas; closure of businesses, industry or companies is also widely mentioned. Sparse areas, in particular, also frequently cite shifts in employment or business patterns.
- ▶ Despite the high level of socio-political activism in rural England, and surprisingly given the more middle-class population profile, there is a high level of political disengagement and disillusionment in rural communities. Only around three in ten of the public believe “I can influence decisions affecting my local area” and this is barely perceptibly higher in hamlets and villages than in towns and cities. One reason is, clearly, that most people feel strongly that *government is* out of touch with their needs: there is little short of universal agreement that “the people who make the big national or regional decisions which affect your area” understand those needs, at best, “sometimes” – more often, “never”.

Demands and hopes for the future

- ▶ There are very significant differences between urban and rural areas and also between the different categories within the rural group, in the issues that the public say are the priorities for immediate action to improve life in their local area. Improving **public transport** is named by a fifth of rural residents as a priority for improving the local quality of life and is the highest priority in villages and hamlets. **Road safety** is also a particular concern in smaller settlements, especially in the less sparse villages and hamlets. **Facilities for young children and for teenagers** are a widespread concern, even if more of a priority in towns and cities than in villages.
- ▶ In sparse areas, there is considerable concern over **job prospects**, and also over **affordable decent housing**, one of the most frequently named priorities for action in sparse rural areas. This pressure is not necessarily being alleviated by existing housing development: even those who report new housing as the biggest recent

change in their own area, and say that “affordable decent housing” is their absolute policy priority for improving the area, are evenly split on whether the change they have already seen is for the better or worse – perhaps because it is not “affordable” and acts more to bring in new affluent residents from outside, rather than to solve the existing housing needs problems.

- ▶ There is an interesting pattern of opinion concerning **farming** issues. When rural people identify priorities for local action, farming is mentioned infrequently. However, when asked about priorities for rural England as a whole which they think Parliament should address, and prompted with a list of possible answers, many rural people highlight farming. In this, they also reflect one element of MPs’ views, as farming comes very high on their list of priorities.
- ▶ However, more broadly, rural doubts that those who take the decisions understand their needs are, arguably, borne out when we compare the views of MPs with those of the rural public. The issues that rural residents say Parliament should prioritise, because they would have the greatest positive impact on rural England, are public transport, law & order, agriculture, young people, healthcare and housing. When MPs were asked which policy issues would have a direct impact on rural England, there were some striking differences – most notably in that just 5% of MPs chose “young people”, ranked in 16th place out of 16 issues listed, and only 7% chose “law and order”, 14th out of 16. Both these issues are in the top four priorities of rural residents themselves.

Conclusions

- ▶ Rural England is, indeed, different from urban England: the surveys throw up numerous distinctions, whether attitudinal, behavioural or demographic. It seems plain that rurality in itself matters – the differences in views that this report describes cannot be explained purely by reference to demographics or socio-economic characteristics. Hence, for both policy makers and for researchers, the rural dimension is one that should not be ignored.
- ▶ Nevertheless, although “rural England” is a reality, it cannot simply be treated indiscriminately as a single entity; there is no single rural perspective, but a number of different perspectives. The settlement size categories in the formal rural and urban definition (i.e. hamlets, villages, towns, urban>10,000) do, for the most part, seem to offer a convenient and meaningful basis for understanding some differences in views. Similarly, the distinction between “less sparse” and “sparse” areas is also highly relevant and highlights some differences that are not amenable to treatment at broad-brush, local authority level, since even in rural areas those in the “sparse” category are in a minority.
- ▶ The findings of this report tell us that, despite the generally contented and optimistic tone of rural residents, there are genuine and widespread fears. More people in rural communities believe recent change to their area has been detrimental than that it has been beneficial; and many are particularly pessimistic about the economic outlook, especially in the sparse areas.
- ▶ Such stirrings of discontent put a premium on good communications between residents and decision makers. Although people across England, in urban and rural areas, have little confidence that decision makers at national and regional levels understand their local needs, this lack of trust is particularly marked in the small settlements of rural England and across the sparsely populated rural areas. This disconnection is a matter for some concern and needs to be addressed.

Introduction

This report is an attempt to get inside the collective mind of “rural England” (if, indeed, there is such a thing), to gain a better understanding of the residents’ views, their concerns and their priorities, as they relate to public policy and government. It attempts to explore differences between the rural and urban public, but also the differences within rural England. Further, it aims at understanding the extent to which rurality, as such, is an influence on the views of the people who live there. How useful is “rural England” as a concept and does rurality itself matter, or is it merely an incidental factor?


Defining rurality

Of course, “rural” is arguably a subjective term, and in Britain has, in the past, been defined in a number of different ways, even within the public sector. Fundamental to this report’s analysis is a detailed definition of what is “rural”, developed by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) and various interested government departments and agencies and published in 2004, with the intention that it should become common currency for policy purposes and for use in statistical reporting. This classifies every census output area in England and Wales into one of four strata on the basis of the population size and density of the settlement of which it is part – “urban”, “small town & fringe”, “village” and “dispersed (hamlets & isolated dwellings)”. (For brevity, in this report the strata are simply referred to as “urban”, “(rural) towns”, “villages” and “hamlets”.) The last three, comprising all settlements with a population of less than 10,000, are collectively regarded as “rural”.

Each of these four categories is sub-divided by a second, cross-cutting classification or “context” into “sparse” and “less sparse” areas, on the basis of the population density of the surrounding area (up to a 30km radius).¹

Population of urban and rural England (2001 Census)

	Population (Millions)	Adults 16+ (Millions)	%	% (exc London)
Urban				
Less sparse (London)	7.1	5.6	14.7%	
Less sparse (outside London)	31.8	25.2	65.7%	77.0%
Sparse	0.1	0.1	0.2%	0.2%
Town & fringe				
Less sparse	4.2	3.3	8.7%	10.2%
Sparse	0.2	0.2	0.5%	0.5%
Village				
Less sparse	3.2	2.6	6.7%	7.9%
Sparse	0.2	0.2	0.5%	0.6%
Hamlets & isolated dwellings				
Less sparse	1.3	1.1	2.8%	3.2%
Sparse	0.1	0.1	0.3%	0.4%
Total urban			80.5%	77.2%
Total rural			19.5%	22.8%
Total less sparse			98.5%	98.3%
Total sparse			1.5%	1.7%



The vast majority of the English public fall into the “less sparse urban” category, as the table shows; this report is concerned with the minority that fall outside that group.

One function of this report is to explore how useful the official definition of rurality and its sub-categories is in analysing perceptions across “rural England”. While there are obviously certain pertinent respects in which life in England’s biggest cities inevitably differs from life in its smallest hamlets, are the differences systematic enough for a rigid categorisation to be useful?

It is perhaps worth pointing out at this early stage that “rural” is not to be simply equated with “agrarian”. Agriculture employs only a small part of the rural population and - even allowing for the wider group who are indirectly dependent on it by providing goods and services to local economies that draw their wealth from agriculture – there are other industries and interests that affect more rural people.

Information sources

The report is based primarily on the *Rural Insights Survey 2006*, a face-to-face survey of English adults outside London, conducted in February and March 2006 by Ipsos MORI for the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), and, where not otherwise noted, it draws on that survey for its evidence; but it also makes use of other evidence including:

- ▶ The *State of the Countryside Survey 2006*, a telephone survey of English adults outside London, conducted in February and March 2006 by Ipsos MORI for the CRC;
- ▶ Fortnightly MORI Omnibus surveys with a representative sample of the adult British public, which provide an adequate sample size in rural areas when enough surveys are aggregated together;
- ▶ An Ipsos MORI survey of MPs in Winter 2005;
- ▶ Several recent waves of the annual British Social Attitudes survey conducted by the National Centre for Social Research;
- ▶ A survey on Attitudes to Rural Disadvantage conducted by BMRB for the CRC in November and December 2005;
- ▶ Other previous public opinion research conducted for the Countryside Agency.

The Rural Insights survey was designed to maximise the ability to detect distinctions between the various rural classifications and, therefore, interviewed equal numbers in each category, rather than taking a proportionate number reflecting the population in each, as would be the case with most national surveys. (For full technical details of the surveys, see the appendix.) The survey covered the eight English regions with both rural and urban areas. The surveys were therefore carried out throughout England but excluding London², and is generally to this that overall figures refer when they are given, although most of the other sources used also include data on London and this has been referred to where relevant. Where reference is made to characteristics or opinions of the whole of rural England, or the whole of urban England except London, the data has, of course, been reweighted to correct the effects of the disproportionate sampling and to ensure that the figures given are the best estimate available from the survey of the views or behaviour of the group in question.

As well as simply tabulating the data, more sophisticated statistical techniques (multivariate regressions) have been used to explore the relationship between various findings of the survey, in particular to examine whether the distinctive characteristics and opinions of the rural population are independent of the demographic differences between the people living in different types of area. Where relevant, the findings of these analyses are reported.

Structure of the report

The remainder of this report falls naturally into four sections.

First we examine the **context** for our findings, the characteristics of rural England and its population and how these differ from the urban majority, both in terms of basic demographics and in their behaviour and lifestyle. While some of these differences may in themselves be dependent on the rurality of these areas, they are also factors in, and causes of, attitudinal differences and the rural population's expectations of government.

Second, we look at **how rural England's people think and feel** – about themselves, about life in their communities, about their relationship with government and their trust in their political representatives and about the changes they believe they see taking place in their local area.

Third, we consider the hopes and demands for the **future**, the policy areas which they consider priorities for their own area and for rural England as a whole and we compare their answers with the understanding that MPs have of rural problems.

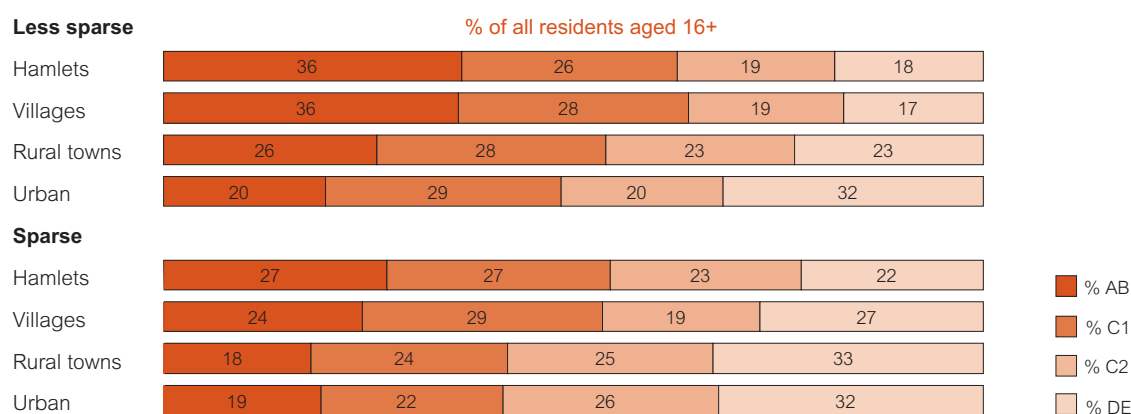
Finally, our **conclusion** draws some of these factors together and speculates as to their implications, both for research and for public policy concerning rural areas.

What rural England is like

Demographic context

An important aspect in understanding the nature of the rural communities is that they differ from urban England not merely in the geographical aspect, but in some important demographic respects, which are reflected both in their attitudes and their behaviour. Rural areas, especially the less sparse villages and hamlets, have a distinctly higher proportion of AB households (the professional and managerial classes), with fewer DEs (the semi-skilled and unskilled working class and those dependent on state benefits or otherwise living on subsistence incomes).³

SOCIAL GRADE

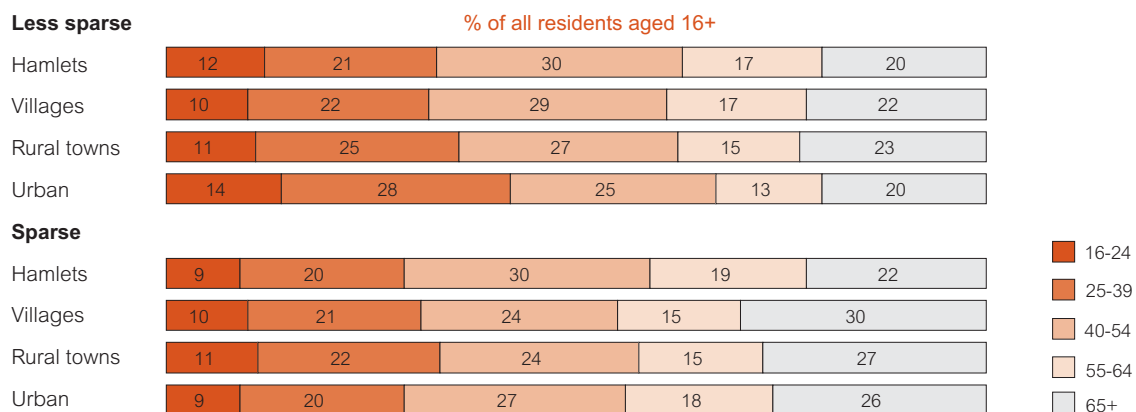


Source: CRC/Ipsos MORI Rural Insights Survey 2006
 Base: c500 adults 16+ in each category, 17 February - 27 March 2006

Council and other social housing stock accommodates far fewer in rural than urban areas, especially in the villages and hamlets. Those living in villages and hamlets are significantly more likely than those in towns and cities (except the sparse urban areas) to own their property outright and many more of the remainder are renting privately. (In the sparse hamlets, 16% rent privately and only 4% from the council and 3% from a housing association or other social landlord; by way of comparison, in less sparse urban areas outside London 18% rent from the council and a further 8% are in other social housing, while only 6% rent from private landlords.)

Differences in age⁴ are less dramatic, though in sparse areas the population is a little older – in particular, there is a higher proportion of retired people, which of course has implications both for the economic base, in the balance of public services required and in the importance of health as an issue. In general, rural areas of all types have a lower proportion of people in the age range 25-39 than the less sparse urban areas of England.

AGE



Source: Census 2001

Employment

Rural areas contain a somewhat different mix of industries and services from urban areas. Agriculture is a much more important source of employment in hamlets and villages than in towns in cities, of course, but, even where it is most significant (sparse hamlets), it accounts for only a fifth of jobs; in less sparse hamlets, the level is half that and halves again for villages. When the category is widened to include all those who draw their income from the land or countryside in any way⁵, however, we account for 42% of adults in sparse hamlets, 24% in less sparse hamlets and 20% in sparse villages; but the numbers are considerably lower elsewhere⁶. Nevertheless, across rural England as a whole, several other sectors employ more people: grossing up from the survey suggests that there are half a million rural residents working in wholesale or retail, for example, and almost as many in health and social work and in education, compared to just over quarter of a million in agriculture, hunting or forestry. But these, of course, are important sources of employment everywhere; agriculture is particularly distinctive of the most rural areas.

Also worthy of note is that the hotel and catering trade is twice as significant in sparse as in less sparse areas.⁷

Q In which of the following sectors/industries/professions do you work?

	LESS SPARSE				SPARSE			
	Rural			Urban	Rural			Urban
	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%
Wholesale and Retail Trade, and Motor Vehicle Repair	10	11	12	10	6	11	15	16
Health and Social Work, and Veterinary Services	12	11	11	11	11	8	11	8
Education	10	10	10	11	9	9	6	9
Construction	8	5	8	10	5	11	8	5
Manufacturing	6	6	7	9	5	5	4	7
Transport and Communication	4	6	6	9	4	3	6	6
Agriculture, Hunting and Forestry	10	5	4	1	20	7	6	3
Public Administration and Defence	4	5	6	2	2	7	2	4
Other Community, Social and Personal Service Activities	6	4	5	5	6	6	7	8
Banking, finance and insurance	4	4	6	5	2	2	2	1
Hotels and Catering	3	4	4	4	8	8	9	9
Electricity, Gas and Water Supply	2	2	3	2	1	1	3	1
Real Estate, Renting and Business Activities	2	3	1	1	1	1	1	1
Domestic staff in private households	1	1	*	1	1	2	2	2
Fishing	-	-	-	-	-	1	2	*
Mining and Quarrying	1	1	*	-	1	-	*	*
Diplomatic representation, international organisations	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
Other	16	20	15	15	15	17	13	15
Don't know	*	-	-	1	1	-	-	1
Not stated/refused	3	4	2	4	3	3	4	3

Source: CRC/Ipsos MORI *Rural Insights* 2006
 Base: 2,051 adults 16+ who work, 17 February-27 March 2006
 *=less than 0.5 percent but more than zero



Transport

On the basis of survey information, it seems that modern life in villages and smaller communities is seen as almost impossible without access to a car and only a tiny fraction of the population here have no car in their household, though this is marginally more widespread in smaller towns (and considerably more widespread in urban areas). According to the 2001 census, 25% of English households outside London had no car, but this fell to 8% in both sparse and less sparse hamlets/isolated dwellings, 10% in less sparse villages and 12% in sparse villages. Similarly, more people in rural areas drive a car themselves “these days” than urbanites (59% in London, 70% in other urban areas, but 81% in both small towns and villages)⁸ and 55% of the rural public say they travel by car as the driver every day or nearly every day. (By contrast, only just over a quarter in London and 45% in other urban areas say the same.)⁹

The rural minority without access to a car are very much concentrated among pensioners and the lowest social grades. Only 3% of rural ABC1 adults, 8% of C2s and 9% of Ds, but 39% of Es, said that they had no car or light van in their household, almost certainly a reflection of lower incomes; the same factor is reflected in tenure patterns, with 28% of those renting from the local council and 22% of those in other social housing having no vehicle in their household. The youngest (16-24) age group were a little more likely than average not to have access to a car (9%), again probably reflecting lower incomes, compared to 4% of those aged 25-64, but among the 65-and-overs the proportion rises to one in five (21%). Least likely of all to have a car are young adults from the least affluent households, three in five 16-24 year olds from social grade E saying they have no car.

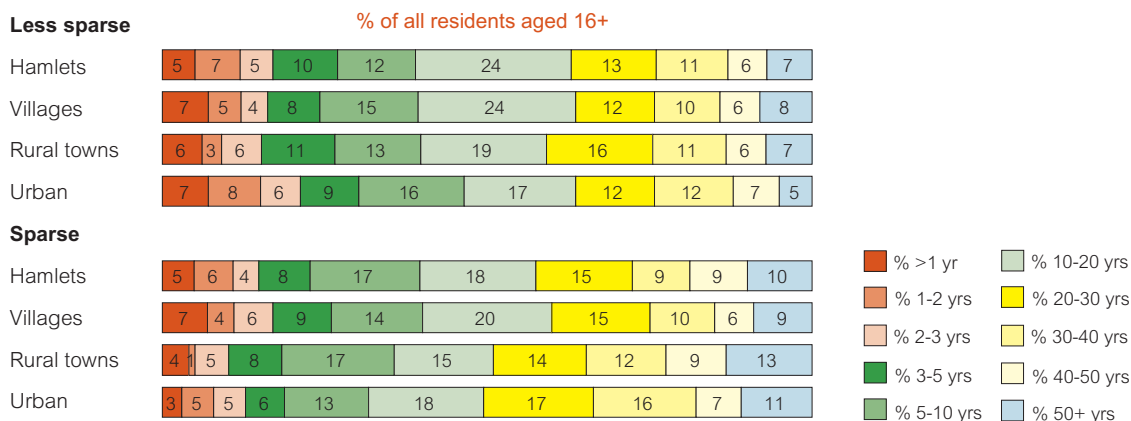
Residency

There is little to choose between urban and rural communities in terms of how long people have lived in the area. With the exception of the sparse urban towns, roughly half the adult population in all categories has lived in the area between 2 and 20 years and, in most types of area, between a third and two-fifths have lived there longer, making for substantially-rooted communities of all sorts. But in the sparsely populated towns, both rural and urban, those roots are deeper, with around half the entire adult public being residents of at least twenty years' standing.

Similarly, we find that people in urban areas and rural towns are *more* likely to have lived there all their life than those in villages and hamlets, but also that more people in sparse than in less sparse areas have never lived anywhere else.

The most mobile section of the population is the young. The vast majority of those who have lived in their area less than a year, and the bulk of those who have lived there less than two years, are aged 35-or-under; those at a more advanced age move from one area to another only very rarely. The working class is also a little less mobile and more deeply rooted locally than the middle class.

LENGTH OF RESIDENCE



Source: CRC/Ipsos MORI *Rural Insights Survey 2006*
 Base: c500 adults 16+ in each category, 17 February - 27 March 2006

Roots

Those who have moved in to rural areas may come from urban areas, but most come from Britain and have always lived there. By contrast, in London half the public or their partners were born outside Great Britain; this is true of fewer than a fifth in the rest of England, with little difference between urban and rural areas. Similarly, almost a half of Londoners have lived outside Britain for at least a year, while only a quarter elsewhere have done the same.¹⁰ Nor is rural England ethnically diverse – the population of all six categories of rural area, and for that matter the population of the sparse urban towns, is at least 98% white.


Family structure

There also seems to be a greater degree of family stability to be found in rural areas, where far fewer were brought up as children outside two-parent households than in urban England. (11% in London and 16% elsewhere in urban England had not been brought up living with both parents, compared to 10% in rural towns and 7% in villages/hamlets.)¹¹

Lifestyle and activities

Following from these demographic differences (especially in the age and class profile), some variations in lifestyle and other activities are inevitable. One consequence is a clear difference in rural needs for, and expectations of, education. Those living in the most rural areas are much more likely to have attended a private/fee-paying school than those in towns and cities (though in London the figure is even higher, 25%, compared to 9% in other urban areas, 12% in the rural towns and 22% in villages and hamlets), as well as being more likely to have sent a child to a private school themselves.¹²

There are some significant differences in media consumption between urban and rural areas, which may well have some impact on attitudes and perceptions. While watching BBC1 is ubiquitous, BBC2 current affairs coverage is watched much more in sparse than in less sparse areas: 40% of adults in sparse areas say they regularly use BBC2 as a source of information about news, current affairs and issues of the day, and 11% say it is one of the sources they refer to most often; in less sparse areas outside London, only 29% are regular watchers and 5% cite it as one of their most used sources. (In London, voracious for news, the figures are similar



to those in the sparse areas, 39% and 8% respectively.) Channel 5, by contrast, is more viewed in London than elsewhere and more in urban areas outside London than in rural areas, perhaps at least partly because there are still parts of the country where it cannot be received at all or is still too new to have broken into viewers' habits. (Channel 5 is regularly watched as "[a] source of information you use for news, current affairs and issues of the day" by 24% of adults in London, 17% in less sparse areas outside London and 13% in sparse areas, and by 18% in urban areas outside London, but only 11% in the rural towns and 12% in hamlets/villages.)¹³

The rural areas are also more avid listeners to BBC local radio. In hamlets, 22% listen regularly as a source of information about news and current affairs and 8% say it is one of the sources they refer to most often; in villages, the corresponding figures are 15% and 4%, in rural town and fringe 12% and 4% and urban areas outside London 11% and 3%. (In London it is only 5% and 1%.)¹⁴

Readership of all the main tabloid daily newspapers is lower in the smaller settlements, of the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Times* higher (though *The Times* is read even more in London). Those reading no newspaper regularly are rarer in London than elsewhere, but there is no significant difference between other urban and rural areas.¹⁵

Rural areas have not in any sense been backward in adopting new media. In the most rural areas, at least those that are less sparsely populated, a significantly higher proportion of adults have access to the internet than is the case in urban areas: 56% in urban areas, but 65% in rural areas (rising to 70% in less sparse villages, though only 56% across sparse rural areas) use the internet either at home or at work. However, there has been a significantly slower spread of broadband internet connection to the sparse than to the less sparse areas, presumably for supplier-related reasons: 43% in less sparse areas, but only 34% in sparse areas, say they use the internet through a broadband connection at home.

As is also true in urban areas, there is a very substantial age bias in rural internet use, with only 22% of rural 16-54 year olds and 38% of those aged 55-64 but almost three-quarters (73%) of those aged 65-and-over not using the internet. There is also a strong class distinction – driven not only by affluence, but by the greater use of the internet at work in middle-class occupations – so that 21% of ABC1s, 44% of C2s, 57% of Ds and 81% of Es in rural England say they are not internet users. These factors are cumulative, so that more than nine in ten C2s, Ds and Es aged 65+ have no internet access. Two-thirds of those living in rural council housing also have no access to the internet.

The class differences in internet access are further exacerbated in the ongoing switchover to broadband: of those in rural areas who say they use the internet at all, 71% of ABC1s, but only 55% of Es, have a broadband connection at home; interestingly, this pattern is not true in urban areas, where those of the lower social grades who have internet access at all are as likely as any other net users to have broadband. There is also a steep gradient by age, with 78% of rural 16-24 year old net users, but only 50% of those aged 65+, being connected to broadband.

Membership of the Anglican church has survived more strongly in rural areas, which is likely to be reflected not only in religious attitudes but culturally. The 2004 British Social Attitudes survey¹⁶ found almost half the adult population in the smallest communities adhering to the Church of England and two in five in rural towns, compared to three in ten in urban areas and less than a quarter in London; in London, members of other Christian denominations outnumber Anglicans, making up a third of the total adult population, double the proportion in rural England. (Muslims and members of other non-Christian faiths are also, of course, virtually absent in rural areas, given the low ethnic minority population.)

Not only would we expect this to contribute in itself to a more uniform outlook, but of course it enhances the potential of the Church as a unifying local institution and the focus of many community activities, especially in the smaller settlements.

Community activities draw in a greater part of the population in rural areas than urban: 37% in rural areas and only 26% in urban areas say they have been involved with local organisations over the last three years. Such involvement is also higher in villages and hamlets than in towns and in sparsely populated than in less sparse areas.¹⁷

But this higher level of activism in rural areas is not restricted to the communal sphere. Evidence from the fortnightly MORI Omnibus survey also suggests that those living in sparse areas are more “socio-politically active” than those in less sparse areas and those in rural areas are more so than in urban areas – more likely to express their views, whether by meeting elected representatives, writing to editors or making speeches, more likely to be an active campaigner or fund-raiser and more likely to encourage other people to do the same.

Q Which, if any, of the things on this list have you done in the last two or three years?

	England outside London					London	
	Less sparse	Sparse	Hamlets/ Isolated	Village	Town & Fringe	Urban >10K	
n=	32,759 %	847 %	517 %	2,111 %	4,159 %	26,819 %	6,036 %
Presented my views to a local councillor or MP	16	22	25	22	17	15	10
Written a letter to an editor	6	14	11	10	7	6	5
Urged someone outside my family to vote	18	22	28	19	18	18	16
Urged someone to get in touch with a local councillor or MP	13	19	18	17	13	13	10
Made a speech before an organised group	14	19	21	19	15	13	10
Been an officer of an organisation or club	9	17	17	16	12	9	6
Stood for public office	1	2	2	2	1	1	1
Taken an active part in a political campaign	3	5	7	4	3	3	3
Helped on fund raising drives	24	35	34	34	29	23	14
Voted in the last general election	65	79	76	73	70	64	60

Source: MORI Omnibus, January-December 2005
Base: 39,642 adults aged 15+ in England giving identifiable postcodes

It is worth noting, however, that across the country these socio-political activities are generally more frequently carried out by middle-class than working-class citizens and that the class profile of rural and sparse areas, therefore, goes a long way towards explaining this difference. Nevertheless, statistical analysis shows that both settlement size and sparsity appear to be significant factors, even after controlling for class and age, in explaining some elements of this higher level of socio-political activity.

How Rural England Thinks

How rural communities see themselves

Self-identity and identity with the community

Although the categorisation and sub-classification of the rural population by the ONS definition seems to correspond to some real demographic differences, we should remember that the categorisation was not designed on the basis of the way that rural residents define themselves. Certainly, being “rural” is rarely fundamental to their self identity: when asked to name a single thing that “is very important to you when you think of yourself”, 13% in the villages and hamlets, but only 3% in the “rural” towns, think of themselves as “a country person”.¹⁸

On the other hand, when asked to make a choice, more people describe their areas as “rural” than we would classify as such. It is clear that most of the public, at least outside the major cities, think of the “area where you live” as encompassing not just their town or village but the surrounding area as well, so that town-dwellers nevertheless characterise their area as “rural”. Two-thirds of those who live in areas classified as “sparse urban” (in other words, living in towns with a population of more than 10,000) describe the type of area where they live as “mainly” or “completely rural”. Indeed, almost a third of those living in *less sparse* urban areas say the same.

Q Which of the following best describes the type of area in which you currently live, would you say?

	LESS SPARSE				SPARSE			
	Hamlet/ isolated %	Rural Village %	Town %	Urban %	Hamlet/ isolated %	Rural Village %	Town %	Urban %
A completely urban area	2	3	4	25	1	1	1	5
A mainly urban, but also partly rural area	5	7	20	43	1	2	19	26
A mainly rural, but also partly urban area	30	35	49	22	13	20	44	46
A completely rural area	62	55	25	7	82	77	33	20
Can't say/ not sure	1	0	2	2	2	0	2	4

Source: Synovate survey for the Countryside Agency. (Data re-weighted to reflect the population profile)
Base: 6,912 adults, January 2005.

Nor are divisions within the “rural” category clear cut, as many of those officially classified as living in a town think of themselves as living in a village. Three in five (59%) of those whose settlement is classed as “rural town and fringe” describe their community as a “country village”, while only 38% call it a town.¹⁹ It may be important to bear in mind that the official classifications of something as complex as rurality may not coincide with how local people refer to the issue in their own informal language, to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings between governed and government.

Rural people tend to have a somewhat higher degree of attachment to their local area than do those in urban areas, and this is especially true in the villages: 48% of the public in villages and hamlets say they feel “very closely” attached to their local area, compared to 43% in the rural towns, 38% in urban areas outside London, and 31% in London.²⁰ Greater reliance on local media, as evidenced by wider use of BBC local radio as a news source (mentioned above, p 14), probably contributes to this.

There are also differences in the *size* (or sort) of the community with which people identify. Those in sparse areas (of all four classes) are somewhat more likely to identify with the *whole* town or parish than those in less sparse areas, who tend instead to identify more with their own immediate neighbourhood. (The whole district council area, though, gets few identifiers anywhere²¹, and there is no noticeable difference between communities in their attachment to the government region.²²)

Community spirit

People in rural settlements seem to have a very different collective culture from urban ones. There is a strong sense of community (two-thirds of the rural public, 69%, agree that “There is a strong community of spirit around here”²³), of a close-knit local identity, and an assumption of mutual trust - though by no means everybody in the rural areas feels this and a weakening of this community spirit is one of the most frequently mentioned changes that rural people have noticed in their communities.

Different types of rural areas express very similar views of the degree of co-operation in their neighbourhood – everywhere, opinions are divided, so that at least two-fifths of residents feel they live in “the sort of place where people do things together and try to help each other”, but up to a third feel “people mostly go their own way”. In *sparse* villages and hamlets, however, people are much more positive (believing people do things together by a three-to-one margin), while urban areas have a plurality feeling people go their own way.

Q In general, what kind of neighbourhood would you say you live in? Would you say it is a neighbourhood in which people do things together and try to help each other, or one in which people mostly go their own way?

	LESS SPARSE				SPARSE			
	Hamlet/ isolated %	Rural Village %	Town %	Urban %	Hamlet/ isolated %	Rural Village %	Town %	Urban %
Help each other	42	44	41	32	58	56	41	35
Go own way	28	30	34	44	20	21	30	34
Mixture	28	26	25	21	22	23	27	29
Don't know	1	1	1	2	*	1	2	1

Source: CRC/Ipsos MORI *Rural Insights* 2006
 Base: c. 500 adults 16+ in each category, 17 February-27 March 2006

Those from lower social grades are more likely to perceive a lack of collective community spirit in rural areas than their middle-class counterparts (39% of rural DEs, compared to 26% of ABs, feel that people in their area “go their own way”), but the most striking difference is between men and women – 47% of women, but only 38% of men, feel they live in a neighbourhood in which people do things together and help each other. This would seem to imply that answers do indeed rely on respondents’ personal perceptions, and, perhaps, on their own experiences and degree of involvement, rather than necessarily on objective differences in the character of communities.

The perception of a community spirit is reflected in more concrete examples. For example, people in rural areas tend to be more confident of the help they could expect from their neighbours: they are more likely than urban residents to say they would feel comfortable asking a neighbour to collect a prescription or to borrow a plunger to unblock the sink or a fiver to pay the milkman.²⁴ Similarly, those in villages and less sparse towns are more confident they could get a lift from a neighbour, if they couldn’t use their own car, than are those in urban areas and sparse towns, though also more so than those in hamlets (perhaps simply because neighbours are scarcer there).

People in villages also express a much higher level of inter-personal trust than those in towns or cities - not just as a description of their own local area, but in their general attitudes. Half the public (51%) in villages and hamlets say that, generally speaking, “most people can be trusted”, while 48% take the view that “You can’t be too careful in dealing with people”; in rural towns, though, distrusters outnumber trusters by 60% to 39%, and in urban England (outside London) it is 62% to 36% in favour of the more cautious view.²⁵

Perceived quality of life

Very few of the English public rate their quality of life as “very” or even “fairly” bad, but they are more likely to feel it is “very good” the smaller the settlement. In rural England, perceived quality of life is very similar in sparse and less sparse settlements of similar size, though in urban areas satisfaction is higher in the sparse than less sparse towns and cities – as high, in fact, as in the rural towns.

We can identify a number of factors that are likely to contribute to this. First, as already noted, people in rural areas are more likely to perceive a positive community spirit in their neighbourhood. Second, there is a clear difference in satisfaction with “the overall surroundings and environmental state of your area”, which those in urban areas are far more likely to rate as “poor” than those in rural areas (although, even in the less sparse urban areas, three in five rate the state of their environment as good, more than three times as many as call it poor).

To this we can add a general optimism for the future: the majority (around 60%) in all types of area, urban and rural, are optimistic that the conditions of their local area as a place to live will get better.

Economic security

Things are less straightforward when people assess the economic state of their local area, for, although the less sparse rural areas are happier than average, the same is not true of the sparse areas.

As in other respects, rural areas seem to have somewhat fewer residents distressed by their economic position or job prospects than do urban areas. This does not imply a lack of problems in rural areas – the BMRB Rural Disadvantage survey found that 63% of those in rural areas agree that “It is difficult to find a well-paid job around here”²⁶ – and, while fewer in the villages and hamlets (28%) feel they personally fall into a low income group than is the case elsewhere, according to the British Social Attitudes Survey as many in rural towns (38%) consider themselves to be on low incomes as in London (37%) or the rest of urban England.²⁷ But, in more practical terms, those in the rural towns are doing a little better: while 20% of Londoners and 13% in other urban areas find it “difficult” or “very difficult” to live on their present income, in the rural areas only 8% in towns and 7% in villages or hamlets reported the same difficulties.²⁸

This data from the British Social Attitudes survey, though, does not allow comparison between sparse and less sparse areas. The Rural Insights data shows a more complicated picture. Around half the public everywhere feel things are going much the same as always. But, of the remainder, those in less sparse rural areas split around three-to-one that their area is on the way up, or even “really thriving”, rather than down or struggling, while in less sparse urban areas the optimists only just outnumber the pessimists.

Q I am going to show you five possible ways of summing up your views about the overall prosperity or economic state of your local area. Which of these, if any, comes closest to how you would describe it?

	LESS SPARSE				SPARSE			
	Rural			Urban	Rural			Urban
	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%
Really thriving	11	11	8	3	5	5	5	2
On the way up	23	26	26	25	19	23	24	20
Much the same as always	52	52	51	50	51	45	46	48
On the way down	8	7	9	17	11	14	13	13
Struggling	3	2	3	3	10	9	9	15
Don't know	3	3	1	1	4	4	3	1
Net positive	+23	+28	+22	+8	+3	+5	+7	-6

Source: CRC/Ipsos MORI Rural Insights 2006
Base: c. 500 adults 16+ in each category, 17 February-27 March 2006

There are also almost as many pessimists as optimists in sparse rural areas, where the public seem far less happy about the economic prospects than in the less sparse areas; and in the eight sparse urban towns, the mood is even more negative.²⁹

Across rural England, middle class residents feel more confident about the economic state of their local area than those in the working class: only 7% of rural ABs and 11% of C1s feel their area is on the way down or struggling, but 16% of C2s and 14% of DEs feel the same. Older residents are somewhat more pessimistic than the young (even after controlling for the fact that they are more likely to live in sparsely populated areas). Also particularly likely to express a negative view are those with no car in their household (20%), those who are separated or divorced (20%) and those living in social housing (18%).

Notwithstanding this, the majority of residents in all types of area, and across all classes and age groups, expect their local area to get better as a place to live. They also have a high level of optimism about their personal financial circumstances³⁰; more people in all sizes of settlement expect their circumstances to improve than to deteriorate, while around half think things will stay the same over the next twelve months. All are far less bullish about the prospects for the general economic condition of the country (half expect it to get worse over the next year)³¹, but it has been a constant finding in many surveys over the years that personal expectations tend to be more resilient than those for the national economy. It is also generally the case that supporters of the Government (of whichever party is in office at the time) are generally more optimistic about the economy than its opponents. So we can read no more into the slightly greater economic pessimism in rural areas today than the lower-than-average support for the Labour Party that we would expect to find, if only on the basis of demographics.

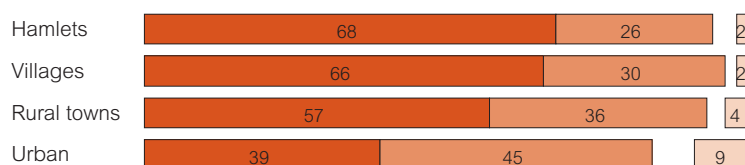
A good place to live

Perhaps surprisingly, in view of this current of disquiet about the local economy, people in sparse areas are mostly content with their area as a place to live. Residents in rural areas are significantly less likely to be dissatisfied with their area as a place to live than are those in urban areas; those in less sparse rural towns also show signs of a higher dissatisfaction than other rural dwellers. Urban residents are similarly less likely to be very satisfied with their local area, especially in less sparse urban areas; satisfaction is highest in the smallest communities.

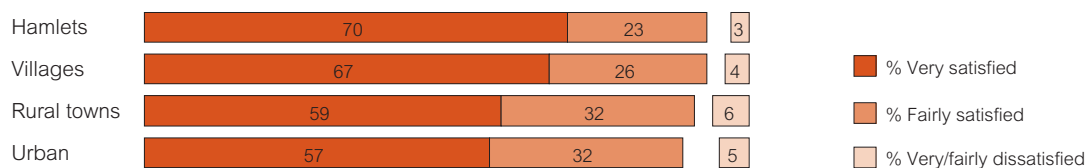
SATISFACTION WITH THE LOCAL AREA

Q How satisfied are you with this area as a place to live?

Less sparse



Sparse




Source: CRC/Ipsos MORI Rural Insights Survey 2006

ABs are much more likely to be very satisfied than other classes (which may simply signify that they can more easily afford to choose an area that satisfies them). Age is also an important factor, as 16-24 year olds are much less likely to be satisfied with their area than average (74%, against 89% for all adults); 15% of them are dissatisfied, double the average. These differences in class and age attitudes contribute to the difference between urban and rural areas, but statistical analysis shows a further distinction over and above this. Rural areas simply seem to be more satisfying to their residents.

What explains this contentment? To some extent it may be a reflection of the strong attachment that rural people have to their local area. But it is also true that the factors people feel are most important in making an area a good place to live are mostly environmental and social and reflect factors we might expect to be more satisfactory in rural areas, although the availability of some services are also frequently mentioned, which would work in the opposite direction. Access to nature/the countryside and a low level of crime were both named by more than one in five, as were good neighbours; but shopping facilities (21%) and public transport (15%) were also frequently cited as important.³²

We should bear in mind that answers to the question about what makes somewhere a good place to live may reflect two diametrically opposed factors: they may be characteristics that the respondent believes to be true of his/her own area and which were a factor in choosing to live there; alternatively, they may be of most obvious importance to a respondent because they cause the most day-to-day concern, in other words are the local area's most conspicuous failings.



The pattern of responses across all types of area seems to support this, for the views of those few who feel dissatisfied with their area are strikingly different from those who are satisfied: access to the countryside is important to 23% of those who are satisfied and only 8% of those who are dissatisfied. On the other hand, those who are dissatisfied with their area are twice as likely as those who are satisfied to mention community activities and events, as well as affordable decent housing, but, most dramatically, twice as likely to mention a low level of crime, which is important to 45% of the dissatisfied and only 23% of the satisfied.

Some of the differences, though, are clearly age effects. Young people (16-24 year olds) are most likely to be dissatisfied with their area, and have a very different order of priorities in what makes an area a good place to live from most of their elders, with two in five saying that good neighbours are important, compared to around one in five of most of the other age groups, while few are worried about access to nature or the countryside. A low level of pollution is also of particular importance to this youngest group.

How rural England has been changing

Most people in England seem to be happy with life, with the area where they live, and generally optimistic about the future, particularly in rural areas. And yet there is a worm in the apple. A substantial majority of rural dwellers feel that the biggest changes in recent years – to the way people live and interact with each other, to the local economy and to the environment – have been for the worse. All is not as happy as it at first appears.

Asked to name the single biggest change they have seen locally in recent years that has affected “the kind of area you live in, and the way people here live and interact with each other”, the “overall prosperity” of the area and the “surroundings and environmental state”, more volunteered changes for the worse than for the better, and many of the changes are ones that – if respondents’ perceptions are a fair reflection of reality – imply some weakening of the distinctive character of rural areas.

Change to the community

Tales of people from outside the local area, phrased in one way or another, are among the most frequent reports of perceived changes to the nature of communities in rural areas, especially in the sparse villages and hamlets, where one in six mention it, far more than cite any other local change. It seems this is noticed most frequently not where the turnover of population is biggest (it is the less sparse urban areas that have the highest proportion of residents who have not lived in the area very long), but where the population is most stable and newcomers, therefore, represent more of a break with the past.

Many in rural communities clearly see this as a threat – more than three-quarters of those who reported such a change said it had been a change for the worse rather than for the better. (Two-thirds of those seeing a similar change in their urban communities also considered it detrimental rather than advantageous.)

Q Thinking about the kind of area you live in, and the way people here live and interact with each other, what is the biggest change to this community you have noticed here, if any, in recent years?

Most frequently given answers	LESS SPARSE				SPARSE			
	Rural			Urban	Rural			Urban
	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%
People keep themselves to themselves/no community spirit	9	11	12	9	9	10	8	7
More houses being built/new development	10	13	15	7	8	8	12	5
Loads of kids/youths hanging about/lack of respect	2	1	4	7	-	1	3	3
Increase in traffic	7	5	3	4	2	2	1	1
Strangers moving in/people from up country/not Cornish	8	8	6	2	16	16	11	7

Source: CRC/Ipsos MORI *Rural Insights* 2006

Base: c. 500 adults 16+ in each category, 17 February-27 March 2006

(Omits answer categories not in the top 3 in any column. Some answers cited as falling within more than one category may be counted twice)

New housing is also frequently reported as the biggest change in recent years. Those who cite it are equally split on whether this has been a beneficial or detrimental change, though more likely to take a negative view in the sparse urban and sparse rural towns. In fact, even those who report new housing as the biggest change in their own area and say that “affordable decent housing” is their absolute policy priority for improving the area are evenly split on whether the change they have already seen is for the better or worse. Much new housing development, it seems, is failing the expectations even of those that want it, perhaps because it is not “affordable”, and acts more to bring in new affluent residents from outside rather than to solve the existing housing needs problems.

Around one in ten adults, in all six of our rural categories, said that the biggest change “about the kind of area you live in, and the way people here live and interact with each other” which they have noticed in recent years has been a lessening of community spirit, or that people are keeping themselves to themselves more. While this trend is by no means confined to rural areas (indeed, almost as many volunteered the same answer about changes to their urban communities), and is no doubt a reflection of wider social trends, it may have a particular impact on the nature of rural areas.

Q And would you say that change is one that has been for the better or for the worse?

	LESS SPARSE				SPARSE			
	Rural			Urban	Rural			Urban
	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%
Better	21	26	29	30	26	29	22	22
Worse	59	58	55	53	53	55	62	63
Neither/don't know	20	16	16	17	21	16	16	15

Source: CRC/Ipsos MORI *Rural Insights* 2006

Base: 2,660 adults 16+ who named a change to the community, 17 February-27 March 2006

It is worth noting that, while less sparse hamlets and villages are more negative about changes to the character of their area than sparse hamlets and villages, less sparse towns and urban areas are *less* negative than sparse towns and urban areas; those in the larger settlements in sparsely-populated areas are the most despondent.

Older rural residents are more likely to name a change for the worse than their younger counterparts (45% of 18-34 year olds but 60% of 35-54 year olds, and 59% of those aged 55+, said the change they had named was one for the worse), and men more so than women (61% to 52%). The likelihood of people mentioning a negative change also steadily increases the longer they have lived in the area. ABs are a little less likely to report change for the worse (51%), but there is no significant difference between C1s (59%), C2s (59%) and DEs (60%).

Change in prosperity

When people are asked to name the most important change they have noticed in recent years that affected the prosperity and economic state of the area and whether it was a change for the better or the worse, we find the greatest anxiety in the sparse areas, matching the other negative perceptions of the economic situation here.

Loss of jobs is the most frequently mentioned change, but more so in sparse than in less sparse areas; closure of businesses, industry or companies is also widely mentioned. Sparse areas, in particular, also frequently cited shifts in employment or business patterns, and hamlets and villages mentioned a decline in agriculture. Even so, as many as a third in less sparse areas and more than a quarter in sparse areas offered no answer, suggesting that they have noticed no significant changes, though these figures were much lower among those who had lived in their area more than ten years.

Q Thinking about the overall prosperity or economic state of your local area, including the jobs and the businesses that you find there, what is the biggest change you have noticed in recent years, if any?

Most frequently given answers	LESS SPARSE				SPARSE			
	Rural			Urban	Rural			Urban
	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%
Business/rural industry closure	22	16	22	18	25	24	21	22
<i>Closure of business/industry/ companies</i>	8	8	13	10	8	10	11	12
<i>Loss of shops/village shops</i>	8	6	10	8	6	7	10	9
<i>Decline in agriculture/ farmers going out of business</i>	8	4	1	*	14	9	2	1
Shifts in employment/ business patterns	17	14	20	13	24	22	29	35
<i>Lack of employment/jobs have gone/have to work away</i>	11	9	9	7	18	14	20	23
More development/employment/ prosperity	12	16	16	19	10	10	14	16
Decline in income/living standards	4	3	5	3	9	6	8	13
House prices/housing development/housing issues	5	7	6	5	7	3	7	4
More industry/business	8	7	8	7	3	6	3	8
None/no answer	36	38	33	35	27	36	28	21

Source: CRC/Ipsos MORI *Rural Insights* 2006

Base: c. 500 adults 16+ in each category, 17 February-27 March 2006

*=Less than 0.5 percent but more than zero.

(Shows only most frequent answers. Some answers cited as falling within more than one category may be counted twice).

In all types of area there were more people who thought the biggest recent change had been for the worse than for the better, but the margin was lower in urban than rural areas, and biggest in the sparsely populated areas. In all three types of sparse rural areas, around three times as many people volunteered a change for the worse as mentioned a change for the better.

Q And would you say that change is one that has been for the better or for the worse?

	LESS SPARSE				SPARSE			
	Rural			Urban	Rural			Urban
	<i>Hamlet/ isolated %</i>	<i>Village %</i>	<i>Town %</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Hamlet/ isolated %</i>	<i>Village %</i>	<i>Town %</i>	<i>%</i>
Better	25	34	35	38	18	23	20	23
Worse	54	48	50	44	62	64	64	63
Neither/don't know	21	18	15	18	20	13	16	14

Source: CRC/Ipsos MORI *Rural Insights* 2006

Base: 2,471 adults 16+ who named a change to local economic state, 17 February-27 March 2006

The pattern of answers among different groups in rural areas is very similar to those given when asked about changes to the community – older people a little more likely to give a negative answer than the young, a bigger difference between those who have lived in the area only a short time and the longer-established residents, and ABs a little less likely to mention a change for the worse than C1s or C2DEs, though in this case there is no significant difference between men's and women's perceptions.

Change to the local environment

There is more variation between different types of rural area in their reports of the biggest recent local environmental change, but two factors predominate – new housing, already mentioned by many respondents as having had an impact on the way people live and on the economic prosperity of the area, and an increase in traffic: traffic is the most frequently named change in the hamlets, both sparse and less sparse, and in the less sparse villages; housing is most often cited in the sparse villages and in the towns. These are both factors mentioned less by urban respondents.

Q Thinking about the overall surroundings and the environmental state of your local area, what is the biggest change you have noticed in recent years, if any?

Most frequently given answers	LESS SPARSE				SPARSE			
	Rural			Urban	Rural			Urban
	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%
Increase in traffic	12	10	8	7	7	8	6	3
Area dirtier/more litter	5	3	4	8	2	3	5	10
Too much building on green areas/green belt land	3	2	6	5	*	2	4	2
More housing	7	6	11	2	6	10	13	5
Lots more development/buildings/area more built up	3	2	6	3	2	4	8	3
Improvements in recycling	3	3	4	8	2	3	2	3
Cleaner area/tidier	1	1	2	3	1	1	3	5
Hasn't really changed/more or less the same	3	2	2	3	6	3	5	3

Source: CRC/Ipsos MORI *Rural Insights* 2006

Base: c. 500 adults 16+ in each category, 17 February-27 March 2006

*=Less than 0.5 percent but more than zero.

(Omits answer categories not in the top 3 in any column. Some answers cited as falling within more than one category may be counted twice).

Again, the majority of those giving an opinion in all types of area think that the most significant recent environmental change has made things worse, not better, though the rural towns take a marginally less negative view than the villages or hamlets. On change to the community itself and to the economic state, it is those living in the sparse areas who are most united in a negative view of recent change, seeing damage to both the way people live and the local economy; but by contrast, when assessing environmental change, those in the villages and hamlets, at least, are slightly *less* likely to say that change has been for the worse in sparse than in less sparse areas.

Q And would you say that change is one that has been for the better or for the worse?

	LESS SPARSE				SPARSE			
	Rural			Urban	Rural			Urban
	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%
Better	25	29	32	38	32	26	38	30
Worse	57	60	49	50	47	55	48	55
Neither/don't know	18	11	19	12	21	19	14	15

Source: CRC/Ipsos MORI *Rural Insights* 2006

Base: 2,338 adults 16+ who named a change to the local environment, 17 February-27 March 2006

By contrast with the findings on economic change and change to the community, marginally more negative perceptions of environmental change are to be found among the higher social grades, with only 48% of the changes to the local environment named by DEs being perceived as changes for the worse, compared to 54% among C2s, 57% among C1s and 54% among ABs. In terms of age, however, it is again the older and longer-standing residents who are most likely to feel that the biggest recent change has been a damaging one.

Those mentioning an increase in traffic as the biggest change are marginally more likely to be drivers than non-drivers, although the difference is not statistically significant once we control for age, social class and type of area; both groups overwhelmingly characterise it as a change for the worse. It seems clear that this is a change impacting both on those using cars, through increased congestion, and on non-users.

Political engagement and governance

There is a high level of political disengagement and disillusionment in rural communities – this is common to urban England, of course, but it is perhaps surprising given the more middle-class profile of rural areas that it should be just as strong rurally, especially as more rural voters live in marginal constituencies³³ and are, therefore, less likely to be neglected by the political parties. People in rural areas are more active than average in other ways as well (see p 15), which we might expect not only to point to a greater willingness to be politically active in itself, but to the probability of a bigger pool of local political enthusiasts willing to do the campaigning donkey-work and generally propagate the political message.

Some of the symptoms, indeed, are as we would expect. Interest in politics is highest in the most rural areas (and in London), a little lower in other urban and small towns. People in the smaller settlements are also a little more likely to think of themselves as supporters of a political party³⁴, and people there are more politically knowledgeable.³⁵

But rural areas take a generally cynical view of politics, politicians and parties and the negative view of the efficacy of political action seems to be shared across all types of area, urban and rural. Thus, we find that only around three in ten of the public believe “I can influence decisions affecting my local area”. Even so, a majority feel that “by working together, people in my area can influence decisions that affect the local area”, but most do not *strongly* agree; again, rural areas are just slightly more positive than urban ones.

One reason is, clearly, that most people feel strongly that government is out of touch with their needs. Rural people tend not to believe that the decision makers who affect them understand the needs and circumstances of their local area, but in this they are not alone; in fact, there is little short of universal agreement across England outside London that “the people who make the big national or regional decisions which affect your area” understand those needs, at best, “sometimes”. Nevertheless, those in sparse areas and in less sparse hamlets are even more likely than average to feel that their needs are understood “rarely” or “never”.³⁶

Q In your opinion, to what extent, if at all, do the people who make the big national or regional decisions which affect your local area understand the needs and circumstances of the people who live here?

	LESS SPARSE				SPARSE			
	Rural			Urban	Rural			Urban
	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%
Always/usually	9	9	10	12	5	11	10	8
Sometimes	31	36	39	35	27	29	28	27
Rarely/never	56	49	47	48	65	57	59	62
Don't know/no answer	4	5	4	5	3	3	3	3

Source: CRC/Ipsos MORI *Rural Insights* 2006
 Base: c. 500 adults 16+ in each category, 17 February-27 March 2006

In both rural and urban England, men are more dismissive of decision makers than women (54% of men and 44% of women feel the relevant needs are not understood), and the old more than the young; there is, however, no distinction in attitudes by class. More intriguingly, those who have lived in the area less than a year are much more likely than anybody else to feel that the decision makers always understand local needs and circumstances, and barely half as likely as anyone else to say that they rarely or never do (though the difference is less in rural than urban areas). While this may partly depend on age, it probably also implies something of a general assumption that one’s own area is particularly badly misunderstood – those who have only just moved into an area probably still tend to feel that this applies to their previous home, and that their new domicile will be better served. That may in turn imply that this impression owes little to real evidence, and more to a general tendency to translate any unpopular governmental decision with local implications (of which some will inevitably arise periodically) into proof of local misunderstanding; but it may equally be that rural areas are genuinely misunderstood by government, but that it takes new arrivals a little time to become fully aware of this.

Demands and hopes for the future

Local problems and priorities for action

The Rural Insights survey asked people in the different rural, and urban, categories to name the things they would like to see done to improve the quality of life for people living in their area.

From the set of different themes that emerged, we can see that there are clear differences between the local priorities of the rural and urban publics. It is also the case that there are some significant distinctions within rural areas – both between towns, on the one hand, and smaller communities, on the other, and between residents in sparse and less sparse areas.

Q What are the main things you would like to see done to improve the quality of life for people who live in this area now? I mean the priorities which you think should be tackled straight away.

Most frequently given answers Multiple answers permitted	LESS SPARSE				SPARSE			
	Rural			Urban	Rural			Urban
	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%
Public transport	28	27	12	9	32	33	17	16
Activities and facilities for teenagers	13	16	29	30	13	22	27	29
Facilities for young children	11	11	14	13	9	14	12	15
Affordable decent housing	11	11	10	7	24	19	21	15
Job prospects	6	5	12	6	23	14	23	28
Shopping facilities	17	15	9	11	12	12	13	15
Road safety	18	18	9	11	13	12	3	7
Road/pavement maintenance	11	12	9	6	11	6	5	6
Sports and leisure facilities	7	7	10	8	8	10	8	14
Health services	5	3	5	4	9	8	12	11

Source: CRC/Ipsos MORI Rural Insights 2006
Base: c. 500 adults 16+ in each category, 17 February-27 March 2006

Asked to pick a *single* priority for immediate action (see chart overleaf), public transport tops the poll in villages and hamlets, while activities for teenagers are most important to those in rural towns. This is common to less sparse and sparse areas, but affordable decent housing comes second in all sizes of less sparse settlement, while it is road safety that exercises more of the people in sparse hamlets and villages.

MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE PRIORITY FOR IMMEDIATE IMPROVEMENT

Q And of these what is the absolute priority?

	LS hamlet	LS village	LS town	LS urban	S hamlet	S village	S town	S urban
1.	Public transport (13%)	Public transport (12%)	Activities for teenagers (14%)	Activities for teenagers (14%)	Public transport (15%)	Public transport (16%)	Activities for teenagers (13%)	Job prospects (15%)
2.	Road safety (11%)	Road safety (10%)	Public transport (6%)	Level of crime (11%)	Affordable decent housing (13%)	Affordable decent housing (12%)	Affordable decent housing (12%)	Activities for teenagers (11%)
3.	Shopping facilities (9%)	Activities for teenagers (7%)	Facilities for young children (5%)	Cleanliness of streets (6%)	Job prospects (8%)	Activities for teenagers (9%)	Job prospects (9%)	Affordable decent housing (6%)
4.	Activities for teenagers (6%)	Affordable decent housing (6%)	Job prospects (5%)	Facilities for young children (4%)	Road safety (6%)	Job prospects (6%)	Public transport (7%)	Facilities for young children (6%)
5.	Affordable decent housing (5%)	Road/pavement maintenance (6%)	Level of crime (5%)	Road safety (5%)	Road/pavement maintenance (5%)	Facilities for young children (5%)	Health services (5%)	Health services (6%)

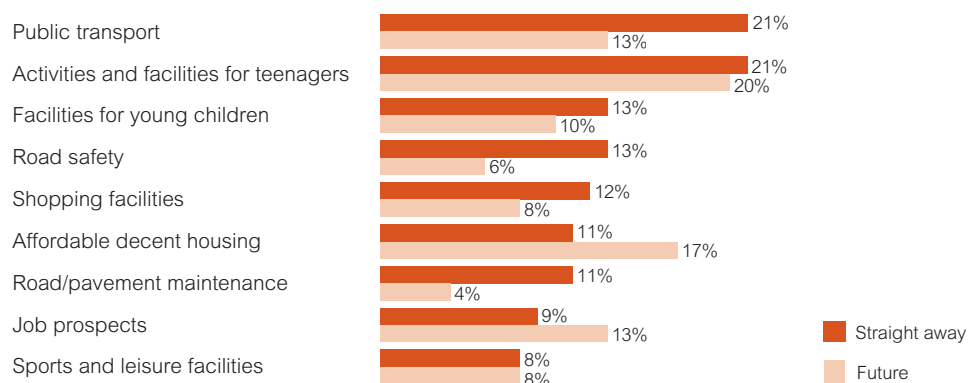
Source: CRC/Ipsos MORI Rural Insights Survey 2006

Respondents were also asked about the longer term priorities for action to improve the lives of future generations. Significantly, the answers given revealed no great distinction between immediate priorities and more long-term needs, for all of the factors most frequently mentioned as liable to improve the quality of life now are fundamentally structural. Taking the longer-term view, housing and job prospects were somewhat more often, and public transport somewhat less often, mentioned, but there are no issues that appear high in one list and not in the other.

SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM PRIORITIES

Q What are the main things you would like to see done to improve the quality of life for people who live in this area now? I mean the priorities which you think should be tackled straight away?

Q And looking to the future, what are the main things you would like to see done in this area which you think are likely to improve the quality of life for future generations living here?



Source: CRC/Ipsos MORI Rural Insights Survey 2006
Base: c. 3,000 residents in Rural England, February-March 2006

Omits responses below 8% on each question

We can consider each of the most frequently-named priorities for immediate action in greater detail, noting both where, and with whom, it is a matter of particular concern.

Transport and traffic

One in five (21%) across rural England name improving **public transport** as one of the main things they would like to see done to improve the quality of life in their area, and this rises to a third in sparse hamlets and villages, where public transport services are, of course, most sketchy. It is the most frequently named single, absolute priority in villages and hamlets, less sparse as well as sparse, named as their choice by between 12% and 16% in each of those four categories, though it is less of a priority in rural town and fringe areas.

Older people are significantly more likely to name public transport as a priority than the young, but allowing for age, it is a little less likely to be a concern the longer somebody has lived in the area. This suggests that part of the pressure comes from the higher expectations of those who have moved only recently from areas with better public transport provision. The middle class mention public transport more often than the working class, which – as in the case of age - applies regardless of the rurality of the area where they live. It is also rather more a concern of women than of men, and is naturally considerably less pressing to those with cars; it was also more frequently mentioned in the East Midlands and South West than in other regions, after controlling for other factors. Nevertheless, the most powerful predictors of choosing public transport as a priority are the rurality of the area and its sparsity.

Unsurprisingly, the car is central to the lives of most rural residents. Two-thirds of the rural public (65%) feel that “Lack of public transport in this area forces some people to own a car even though they can't really afford to”, rising from 59% in the rural towns to 71% in villages and 72% in hamlets.³⁷

Consequently, those in rural areas are most likely to see no alternative to using their car. If the price of petrol were to double, 12% of urban and 14% of small town, but 22% of village/hamlet residents, say it would make no difference to the amount they use a car.³⁸

One of the most frequently mentioned changes to the rural environment is an increase in traffic, especially in the less sparse rural areas. This is, of course, regarded as a change for the worse by almost all (92%) of those who mentioned it, and the increase in traffic is clearly one of the main explanations of the high numbers in villages and hamlets who say that road safety is one of their main priorities to improve local life – mentioned by 18% in less sparse hamlets and villages, 13% in sparse hamlets and 12% in sparse villages. Indeed, in both less sparse hamlets and villages, it was named by one in ten residents as the single absolute priority, putting it only just behind public transport in second place.

Interestingly, there are no statistically significant differences in concern about **road safety** across different demographic groups. It applies equally to men and women, to all age groups and social classes. But concern is significantly higher than average in less sparse hamlets and less sparse villages, lower than average in sparse towns (where the increase in traffic has perhaps been less marked) and, strikingly, almost twice as high in the West Midlands as anywhere else (even after controlling for the urban/rural make-up of that region). Much the clearest correlation, however, was between those who said that road safety is a priority and those who named an increase in traffic as their biggest local change – but this, of course, does no more than reiterate that traffic is a concern to them.

Another transport-related concern is **road and pavement maintenance**, named by one in nine rural residents (11%) as one of the things that should be tackled straight away, marginally more so in the smaller than larger settlements (though only 4% feel it is an important long-term priority to improve the quality of life for future generations). Picked by 5% as their single most pressing priority for immediate action, it ranked equal fifth across rural England as a whole.

Facilities for young children and for teenagers

Facilities for young children and for teenagers are also a widespread concern, with one in five (21%) of the rural public naming activities and facilities for teenagers as one of their immediate priorities for action and 13% choosing facilities for young children.

Facilities for **teenagers** are more of a priority in towns and cities than in villages, but this includes the rural as well as urban towns – in fact, when asked to name the single absolute priority, activities for teenagers topped the list in rural towns, both sparse and less sparse, as it also did in less sparse urban areas.

The problem of facilities for teenagers is more of a concern to younger age groups, particularly 16-24 year olds (those who are or have recently been teenagers themselves) and 35-44 year olds (those most likely to have children in or approaching their teenage years), with senior citizens significantly less likely than anybody else to mention it – possibly because they are least likely to see the causes rather than the symptoms, and, instead, note teenage crime or anti-social behaviour. Those who have lived longest in the area within any given age group, however, are more likely to mention facilities for teenagers as a priority. The problem is also cited more frequently in the lower social grades, and more by women than by men. Statistical analysis shows that each of these differences is independent of the others, and that there are also significant regional differences. Even controlling for all these factors, concern about facilities for teenagers is still lower the smaller the settlement; but, even so, it is clear that though certainly not a distinctively rural problem it is a significant problem in rural areas nonetheless.

There is less difference by type of area in the numbers calling for improved facilities for **young children**. Again, the issue is mentioned more often by women than by men, and more by 25-34 year olds (the likely age of the majority of parents of the young children in question) than by other age groups; those with children in the household are twice as likely to mention it as a concern as are those without, though even of those with no children living with them 9% thought to mention it, demonstrating that the issue is of wider relevance than to those directly affected by it.

Shopping facilities

Shopping facilities are also a concern to many in rural areas – 12% name this as one of their priorities for immediate action, and 5% as the single most pressing priority, though concern is a little lower in the less sparse rural towns (as it is in less sparse urban areas). It is more likely to be mentioned by women, but otherwise the most substantial differences are regional, and the distinctions of class and age are no longer independently statistically significant once results are controlled by region, nor are those by type, of area except for the higher level of concern in less sparse hamlets and villages. Respondents in the North-East, East Midlands and West Midlands are especially likely to mention shopping facilities as a priority, and those in the North-West least likely to do so.

Affordable decent housing

Affordable decent housing is mentioned by 11% of rural residents as one of their immediate priorities, and by an even higher 17% as a longer-term priority to improve their area.

Those in sparse areas are considerably more likely than those in less sparse areas to say that they would like to see affordable decent housing as an immediate change to improve the local quality of life, and this difference is independent of other demographic factors. Concern about the lack of housing also seems on the face of it very much dependent on settlement size, but, in fact, there is no significant difference once we control for housing tenure. (Those renting in the private sector are significantly more likely than anybody else to see this as a concern, suggesting that for many the decision to rent privately may be driven by the lack of an affordable alternative). The young are also more concerned than the old, although within each age group those who have

lived in an area longest are most likely to cite housing as an urgent problem, perhaps because they have seen long-term growth in prices and, therefore, a reduction in affordability from previous levels. There are also some regional variations, with the need for housing significantly more likely to be cited in the South West, and significantly less likely in the East Midlands, than elsewhere.

One other point to note is that, even though the concern is with “affordable” housing, this is not a particular concern to those on lower incomes – indeed, social class is not a significant predictor of concern about housing at all, and those with a car are significantly more likely to mention it than those who are not.

Job prospects

Just under one in ten (9%) rural residents say that job prospects should be one of the immediate priorities for action in their area, and 13% see job prospects as important to improving the quality of life of future generations.

Concern about job prospects is particularly high, though, in sparse areas. The potential impact of this factor is indicated by the fact that one in ten of those who say they are likely to move from sparse villages or towns in the near future say that better job prospects would be one of one of their main reasons for moving, one of the few specifically local factors to be widely cited as a reason for moving house. As we have seen, loss of jobs or closure of businesses are frequently reported as the most important change to local prosperity in recent years, and in sparse rural settlements almost as many people feel their area is on the way down as think it is thriving.

In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that improvement in job prospects is one of the highest priorities for action to improve the quality of life, especially in sparse areas. Regression analysis shows that it is also a higher concern in less sparse towns, though less pressing than average in less sparse villages and hamlets. These differences persist, even after controlling for demographic factors, though concern is naturally also higher among the young, the lower social grades, and also among men. Regionally, concern is much higher than average in the North East, and a little higher in the South West.

Sports and leisure facilities

Around one in twelve adults living in rural areas (8%) mentions sports and leisure facilities as a priority for immediate action, and the same proportion also sees it as important in the longer term; it is also an issue of particularly high salience in sparse urban areas, where 14% name it as one of their priorities. This is more a concern to the young than to other groups, and much more so in the East Midlands and Yorkshire and Humberside than other regions.

Health services

Overall, health services ranked low on the list of priorities for immediate action, named by only 5% of the rural public, though it is of significantly more concern in sparse areas, especially the sparse towns (where 12% named it as one of their priorities and 5% as the single most pressing one).

The relatively low priority given to health is perhaps consistent with findings from the British Social Attitudes survey, which shows that satisfaction with local doctors is highest in the most rural areas and lowest in urban areas³⁹. (Previous research has indicated that rural people are more likely than urban folk to feel that their GP is part of the community, which may influence views on satisfaction.) Interestingly, though, there is significantly lower satisfaction with NHS Direct in rural areas, even though this is a service that might perhaps be expected to appeal most strongly to more remote areas.⁴⁰

For health (and other) services, it may well be the case that those in rural areas have lower expectations, accepting a lower level of service provision or greater inconvenience of access as an inevitable fact of rural life, concomitant to its other advantages. If so, this would by no means imply that services in rural areas are unimportant to residents, even if they feel improvements to them are a less immediately pressing need than some other issues.

But there may also be both a political and prosperity factor. The better-off majority may be less needful of services such as the NHS in the first place: with fewer residents from the poorer classes of society, demand for public services may be less acute. This is, of course, of little consolation to the deprived minority, especially if the result is that such issues receive less attention from government, and it is important to ensure that they do not as a result slip through the safety net.

Furthermore, a more middle-class profile implies a more Conservative political outlook, which may be less wedded to the principle of public service provision in the first place. Apparently, rural residents have less faith in government provision of services as against private providers than urban areas.

Q Some people think that government is best at running important services like health and education. Others think that private companies would do a better job. Who do you think would be best at providing a good quality service?

	<i>London</i>	<i>Other urban</i>	<i>Rural towns</i>	<i>Rural villages/hamlets</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
Definitely/probably government	43	43	33	33
Definitely/probably private companies	47	50	60	61
Neither/no difference/don't know	9	7	7	7

Source: British Social Attitudes survey 2004 (Q291)

Priorities for Parliamentary action to help rural England

The Rural Insights survey also asked people for their broader views on the priorities for rural England – i.e. those issues that Parliament should prioritise for action.

It is of interest to note that there are some key differences between these responses and those given earlier which dealt with local priorities for action. This may partly reflect a lack of identification between their own local area and “rural England” and, quite possibly, also a different mindset that people adopt when asked to think in terms of government action, Parliament or politics. Less specific questions, such as Ipsos MORI’s regular Political Monitor question on the “most important issues facing the country”, or the British Social Attitudes question asking respondents to identify their first priority for extra government spending, tend to produce fairly uniform responses across the country, with little rural or, for that matter, regional variation. Issues such as health, education, crime, race relations and (in the last few years) defence/Iraq generally predominate, and show considerable conformity to weight of media coverage with little local variation, suggesting that most people tend to think in the terms framed by the national media.


Q I would now like you to think specifically about the rural areas of England. Looking at the topics on this list, which if any, do you think the people who run the country from Parliament should prioritise for action because you feel these would have the greatest positive impact on rural areas and the people who live there?

Most frequently given answers	LESS SPARSE			SPARSE			ALL RURAL
	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	Hamlet/ isolated %	Village %	Town %	%
Public transport (buses, trains etc.)	35	38	29	32	37	28	33
Law & order, crime, policing	25	27	33	16	21	28	29
Agriculture/farming/farm diversification/fishing	33	26	21	42	36	19	25
Young people	17	23	26	22	23	28	24
Healthcare/NHS	27	22	25	26	25	33	24
Housing	16	22	24	28	29	32	22
Education	21	17	21	12	16	18	19
The environment	20	20	16	14	14	11	18
Employment & training	14	14	22	22	19	29	18
Road traffic/road safety/ pedestrianisation	18	21	15	16	15	13	17
The elderly/care homes	15	14	17	16	16	18	16
Sports & recreation	14	15	17	7	12	13	15
Renewable energy generation	14	15	12	16	13	10	14
Local council planning/ development control	15	13	16	11	10	8	14

Source: CRC/Ipsos MORI *Rural Insights* 2006
 Base: c. 500 adults 16+ in each category, 17 February-27 March 2006
 Responses below 15% in all types of rural area omitted

As the table shows, the issues that rural residents most frequently picked (from a list) as ones that Parliament should prioritise, because they would have the greatest positive impact on rural areas of England and the people living there, are public transport, law & order, agriculture, young people, healthcare and housing.

This list seems to be a mixture of the standard list of “important issues facing the country” (health, crime) and of the specific problems that rural residents mention about their own areas (public transport, facilities for young people, housing).



The only one of these leading issues in neither category is agriculture/farming, which is mentioned by 25% of all rural residents. This could reflect rural residents taking a broad-brush view of “rural areas” and, hence, mentioning agriculture as something that springs to mind as typifying the countryside. Interestingly, though, the issue is less often named by urban residents as important to rural areas; indeed this, together with those in urban areas giving education a slightly higher priority, is the main difference between the opinions of rural and less sparse urban residents.

By contrast, farming issues were not mentioned at all frequently in residents’ lists of priorities for *local* action, even in the smallest settlements or in the sparse areas. It may be that even the rural residents feel that this is something that will benefit “rural areas” in general, while not applying to their own area; or it may be that, while feeling it would benefit their own area, it is not an immediate top-of-the-mind priority.

It is of interest to note that the survey did not capture significant evidence of a particularly pressing problem in farming communities. Those working in the agricultural/forestry sector are no less likely than average to say that their area is thriving or on the way up as opposed to struggling or on the way down. (31% of agricultural workers report their area is doing well against 15% saying the opposite, while in the sample as a whole the figures are 30% to 18%, and in rural areas alone 35% to 12%, not a statistically significant difference in either case.) They express satisfaction with their area as a place to live by a majority of 89% to 2% (for all rural dwellers it is 94% to 3%), they judge their quality of life as good by 85% to less than 0.5% (rural residents as a whole agree by 93% to 2%), and are optimistic that local living conditions will improve by 66% to 30% (rural people in general think so by 64% to 34%). The impression is that farming people are not significantly worse off than other rural residents, even though this would seem to be contradicted by news reports at the time of our fieldwork.

Of course, opinion in different types of rural areas is not uniform, though there is a surprising degree of correspondence – more so, certainly, than in local opinions of the most urgent priorities for their own areas. Agriculture is most frequently named as a priority for Parliamentary action in the smallest communities, especially the sparse ones, and public transport is also perceived as a slightly higher priority there; crime and young people are both marginally more so in the towns than the villages and hamlets. One other issue more prominently mentioned in the rural towns than in the villages is employment and training; it is also more often chosen in sparse than less sparse areas, in line with their own local concerns about jobs.

Are rural issues understood by MPs?

We are able to compare the hopes of people in rural areas with the reactions of those who will make the decisions that affect them, as Ipsos MORI conducted a survey of MPs for the CRC in Winter 2005.⁴¹ (It is important to note that this is a survey of *all* MPs, many of whom have few or no rural constituents and may have no strong connections with rural issues).

The policy issue most commonly seen to impact on rural areas is agriculture/farming/fishing, with six in ten MPs selecting this issue from the list provided, farming issues being mentioned more often by Conservative than Labour or Liberal Democrat MPs. Half the MPs also mention housing and public transport, and around a quarter select education and long-term farm diversification as key rural policy issues.

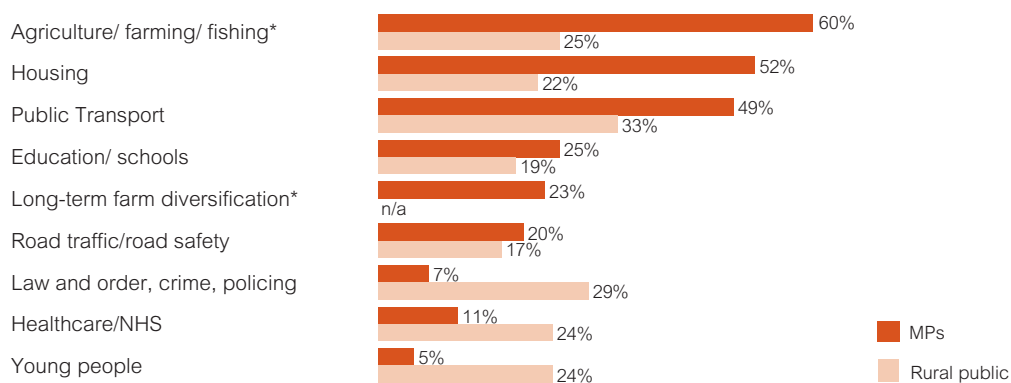
This is in contrast to issues MPs see as important to Britain as a whole – in Summer 2005 the most important issues facing Britain were seen to be the economy, public service delivery and Europe. Housing was mentioned by only 13%, transport by 6% and agriculture did not feature in the top mentions; this is even though housing was also in the top three issues about which MPs received most letters in their postbags, with two-thirds of MPs mentioning it in this survey.

The differences between the two lists of priorities suggest that MPs at least recognise rural England as distinctive and with different problems, but also raise the suspicion that the needs of rural England may be a long way down their overall priorities. If rural residents interpret this as pandering to the far greater number of votes available in urban England rather than tackling the most urgent priorities, it can only reinforce their disillusionment and detachment from the political process.

POLICY ISSUES WITH MOST IMPACT ON RURAL AREAS

Q (To MPs) Which long-term policy issues would you say have a direct impact on rural areas and the people who live there?

Q (To rural public) Which if any, do you think the people who run the country from Parliament should prioritise for action because you feel these would have the greatest positive impact on rural areas and the people who live there?



*" Agriculture/farming/farm diversification/fishing" was given as a single response category in the survey of the public
Base: 101 MPs, Winter 2005; c. 3,000 residents in Rural England, February-March 2006

Omits responses below 20% in both surveys. There were some differences in the lists of topics used

Comparing these priorities with those stated by the people who actually live in rural England, we can see some interesting differences. For example, just 5% of MPs thought "young people" was a long-term policy issue impacting on rural areas, ranked in 16th place out of 16 issues listed; and only 7% chose "law and order", 14th out of 16. Both these issues are in the top four of rural residents themselves, named by around a quarter; and facilities for both teenagers and children also rank high in the list of residents' demands for their own areas. It may be that MPs have not taken the question literally, and have named issues they think have a disproportionate impact in rural areas rather than those that matter at all, but those many rural dwellers who claim that people in government do not understand them will see little here to shake their cynicism.

MPs were also asked about specific groups in rural England who might be experiencing disadvantage and whose problems might need to be addressed by policy makers. Seven in ten MPs thought there was at least a fair amount of need to address disadvantage among farmers and among rural businesses and their employees, and six in ten saw a more general problem of disadvantage for people living in hamlets and isolated country dwellings and for people living in villages in the countryside; only just half, though, said the same about people living in rural towns and suburbs.

Many fewer MPs saw the problems as sufficiently serious that there was a "great deal" of need for policies to tackle them. Only a quarter saw a great deal of need to help farmers and one in six to help rural businesses; as far as disadvantage among people living in rural areas was concerned, 19% admitted a great deal of need for policies to help those living in hamlets, 16% for those living in villages in the countryside, and only 7% those living in the rural towns. It is of interest to note that, although households in poverty exist in all types of settlement across rural England, the true proportions are the inverse of these views – i.e. there is a higher level of financial disadvantage in the rural towns than in the villages and hamlets.

There are some differences in perceptions by party. Most MPs across all the main parties see a need to address disadvantage in rural businesses, but more Conservatives and Liberal Democrats than Labour MPs see a need to help farmers, and Labour Members are also less likely to see a need to tackle disadvantage for those living in hamlets and isolated dwellings.

Conclusions

It seems plain that rural England is, indeed, different from urban England – different in its character, different in its needs. Again and again the surveys throw up distinctions, whether attitudinal, behavioural or demographic, which will affect the needs of the rural population and ought to be a consideration in policy making.

While not all these differences arise from purely geographic factors, it is plain that rurality in itself matters. Even allowing for the differences that are obviously imposed by the employment sectors that provide most jobs in rural England, a population that is a little older and noticeably more “up-market” than in most of urban England, we find numerous significant differences in attitudes, in lifestyle and in demands for the future that go beyond this.

But what clearly emerges is that no single dividing line would be adequate to define those parts of the country that are different because they are “rural”. On some issues, the size of the settlement that someone lives in seems to have an influence on their views and priorities; on other issues, the broader sparsity of the local population is important.

There are a number of implications of this.

For those engaged in broad social research, this work indicates that the rural dimension demands consideration – in the design of work and in the analysis of results.

For those, such as the CRC, engaged in advocacy on behalf of rural residents, there is a need to recognise that there is not a homogenous agenda - the “rural” blanket conceals many important differences beneath its folds, between town and village, village and hamlet, and also between sparse and less sparse areas. There is no single rural perspective, but a number of different, sometimes competing, perspectives, which apply to different problems or aspects of life in modern England.

The differences in views across rural England do not simply apply to the different geographical classifications. There are also clear variations in views related to different characteristics – age, income and beyond. In analysing average views, it is critical to keep this in mind, as there is a risk that the apparent prosperity and satisfaction of the majority in rural areas might mask the problems of the less well-off minority.

For government it is important to recognise that rural priorities will include both those that are (or seem) more rural specific (e.g. transport) and those that are shared with those in urban areas (e.g. facilities for children). Many of the most basic needs of rural residents are, of course, the same as those of the urban majority, but it is important not to dismiss these as rural issues simply because they are not distinctively rural – this is especially the case when the particular nature of rural areas means that in fact the problems of service provision or delivery are very different.

Government should also recognise and address political disengagement of rural people – who are not naturally apathetic or anti-establishment – which may be one of the more urgent problems to be solved, for it is a democratically unhealthy state. Combined with the clear perceptions that rural people are experiencing a deterioration in many aspects of their quality of life, it seems that this disengagement should be a legitimate cause for concern and for political action.

Technical details of the survey

The *Rural Insights* survey was a survey of adult residents of England, except London, conducted between 17 February and 27 March 2006. Ipsos MORI interviewed 4,103 residents aged 16+, with c 500 interviewed in each of the ONS's eight density classifications. Interviews were carried out face-to-face, in homes. The interviews averaged 20 minutes' duration.

Fieldwork was conducted by Ipsos MORI's own fieldforce of face-to-face interviewers (MORI Field & Tab); due to time constraints under poor weather conditions 12 sample points (out of 510) were outsourced to Infocorp. These were allocated in a spread of local authorities and regions across England.

The survey used a quota sampling methodology, whereby census output areas (OAs) were selected randomly as sampling points, using census data for each to construct quotas that reflect the known social-demographic profile of residents in each density classification. The overall sample was stratified into eight separate samples, one for each density classification, to reflect the census profile in each. For practical reasons OAs with less than 50 to 80 households (a relatively small percentage) were excluded, as were "Special" OAs where interviewers are not allowed access – e.g. military barracks, hospitals, prisons and college accommodation.

Sampling points were selected based on assumed strike rates (daily interviews achieved) of 10 in urban and semi-urban areas, down to 7 in the more rural, and the number of OAs selected for each classification's sample was altered to compensate, from 52 in the more urban through to 74 in the more rural. A total of 511 sampling points were selected, including three reserve points per classification.

Quota targets were set for each sampling point on sex, age and working status, based on the unique demographics of each individual OA, and therefore summed up to match the overall known population in each classification.

Survey data were weighted to reflect the profile of the population in each rurality category, and to reflect the overall preponderance of each category in the adult population of England excluding London. The exclusion of London was a deliberate choice in order to allow larger sample sizes in the rest of England which would enable more robust regional comparisons and make clearer the differences between rural and urban categories, in line with the survey's primary focus on rural respondents.

The respondents to the Rural Insights survey are only samples of the total population, so we cannot be certain that the figures obtained are exactly those we would have if everybody had been interviewed. Strictly speaking the statistical formulas to calculate the likely size of sampling variability apply only to probability samples, but experience has shown that in practice they are generally a good guide to the likely variability of similarly sized quota samples.

By convention, research of this sort uses a 95% confidence limit, that is the "margin of error" defines the range around the survey result within which the true result can be expected to fall 19 times out of 20. Within each of the eight rurality categories, the 95% confidence interval on a finding of 50% is roughly four-and-a-half percentage points.

Because the vast majority of the population of England falls within the "less sparse urban" category, while the sample size for this category was the same as for the other seven, the reliability of any combined figures including this category, for example an overall figure for all England outside London, is mainly dependent on the reliability of the less sparse urban measurement, so the "effective sample size" for the combined sample is only a little bigger than the sample size of the biggest category. For findings referring to all England outside London, the 95% confidence interval on a finding of 50% is about three-and-a-half percentage points. For the measurements relating to the six rural categories combined, excluding the two urban categories, the interval is two-and-a-half percentage points.

Notes & references

¹ Some comment on the “sparse urban” category is perhaps worthwhile. The ONS categorisation is designed to classify the whole of England and Wales, and in the context of England alone “sparse urban” is an exclusive and slightly odd category, encompassing a total population of just 100,000. In fact, 98% of the population classified as “sparse urban” is concentrated in just eight towns (Berwick-upon-Tweed, Penrith, Ilfracombe, Minehead, Louth, Mablethorpe, Leominster and Whitby). England’s “sparse urban” areas are not merely subsections of a larger urban area also containing “less sparse urban” areas, they are “sparse urban” in their entirety.

This means that a substantial difference in just one of these towns, dependent entirely on local factors, might easily be, theoretically, “statistically significant” when the group is judged as a whole, yet entirely inapplicable to the other seven towns. We shall, in the course of the report, note some issues where it is the “sparse urban” category which seems most in need of attention, and for reasons which might be more easily associated with rural than with urban needs. Nevertheless, it is perhaps questionable how useful the “sparse urban” category is as either a tool for survey analysis or a context for framing policy in England. Even where these towns have distinctive characteristics in common by virtue of their sparse urban nature, it may make more sense to regard each as an anomaly, having local problems to be dealt with at local level, rather than attempting to find common ground to consider them from a national level.

The eight towns have some other characteristics in common, so that it is not necessarily absurd to consider them as a group: each is a compact and self-contained town, only a little above the population threshold to be classified as urban rather than rural; each is at least 10 miles from the nearest other urban area. In other relevant respects, though, they differ dramatically. Ilfracombe, Louth and Mablethorpe all lost their rail connections entirely between 1970 and 1980; Berwick and Penrith have mainline stations with direct trains to London. Berwick, Leominster, Minehead and Penrith are all the chief (indeed, only) town and administrative centre of their local authority; Whitby and Ilfracombe are both in a local authority dominated by a bigger town some miles away; Louth and Mablethorpe are in the same district, which contains a number of towns, one of which (Skegness) is bigger than either. Tourism is an important economic force in most but not all of them.

² The same is true of the CRC’s State of the Countryside survey.

³ The survey figures for social grade, given here, differ somewhat from those in the 2001 Census. This partly arises from changes in the national social grade profile over the five years since the Census was conducted, but in any case the Census approximation of social grade is not directly comparable with normal market research measures, as its classification of adults aged 65-and-over is not complete, and is less suitable for making a sociological comparison of the different rural and urban categories. (See Corrine Moy and Erhard Meier, “Social Grading and the Census”, *International Journal of Market Research*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 2004, pp.141-170.)

⁴ These figures are taken from the 2001 Census – as the survey was weighted to the census age profile it offers no independent evidence on this point.

⁵ Those who told us they were “A farmer or tenant farmer”, “Another landowner who manages rural land for domestic or business purposes”, “Someone whose job involves working on the land” or “Somebody who otherwise relies on the countryside or coastline for their business or personal income”.

⁶ Ipsos MORI/CRC State of the Countryside survey 2006, D1.

⁷ In the sparse urban towns the figure is of course dependent on the individual towns – 15% in Yorkshire and Humberside (i.e. Whitby), 14% in the North West (Penrith) and 13% in the North East (Berwick) are employed in hotels or catering, and not a single respondent of the 32 employees interviewed in the West Midlands (Leominster).

⁸ British Social Attitudes survey 2004, Q341

⁹ British Social Attitudes survey 2004, Q356

¹⁰ British Social Attitudes survey 2003, Q855

¹¹ British Social Attitudes survey 2004, Q702

¹² British Social Attitudes survey 2004, Q759, 761. Note that the rural sample size in the BSA surveys is too small to make a useful distinction between villages and hamlets.

¹³ MORI Omnibus survey annual aggregate 2005. For these questions, sample size was 191 sparse, 7,112 less sparse and 1,278 London; urban outside London 5,760, rural town & fringe 882, villages/hamlets 661.

- ¹⁴MORI Omnibus survey annual aggregate 2005. For these questions, sample size was 191 sparse, 7,112 less sparse and 1,278 London; urban outside London 5,760, rural town & fringe 882, villages/hamlets 661.
- ¹⁵MORI Omnibus survey annual aggregate 2005. For these questions, sample size was 6,036 London; urban outside London 27,109, rural town & fringe 4,191, villages/hamlets 2,649.
- ¹⁶British Social Attitudes survey 2003, Q710. The survey found many more respondents saying they had “no religion” than is usual in most surveys.
- ¹⁷Ipsos MORI/CRC State of the Countryside survey 2006, Q45. The Synovate survey for the Countryside Agency (2005) found a not dissimilar pattern in declared willingness “to get involved with the local community”.
- ¹⁸British Social Attitudes survey 2003, Q601
- ¹⁹BMRB/CRC Rural Disadvantage Survey, November-December 2005. The 2003 British Social Attitudes survey (Q852) had similar findings, 56% of town and fringe residents saying they lived in a village, 43% in a town or city.
- ²⁰British Social Attitudes survey 2003, Q586-90
- ²¹Synovate survey for the Countryside Agency, 2005
- ²²British Social Attitudes survey 2003, Q586-90
- ²³BMRB/CRC Rural Disadvantage Survey, November-December 2005
- ²⁴British Social Attitudes survey 2003, Q427
- ²⁵British Social Attitudes survey 2002, Q435
- ²⁶BMRB/CRC Rural Disadvantage Survey, November-December 2005
- ²⁷British Social Attitudes survey 2004, Q232
- ²⁸British Social Attitudes survey 2003, Q257
- ²⁹Again, though, this can be put down to local factors as there are differences between the component towns – the burghers of Berwick and Leominster split three-to-one in favour of the view that their local area is on the way down, but in Penrith and Whitby opinion is just as strong in the opposite direction. But these are very small sub-sample sizes.
- ³⁰Ipsos MORI/CRC State of the Countryside survey 2006, Q38
- ³¹Ipsos MORI/CRC State of the Countryside survey 2006, Q39
- ³²Ipsos MORI/CRC State of the Countryside survey 2006, Q3
- ³³On the basis of the 2001 census, 32% of adults in English hamlets, 30% in villages, 27% in rural towns but only 19% in urban areas lived in parliamentary constituencies that were “marginal” at the 2005 general election, that is where the margin of victory at the previous (2001) general election had been 10% or less of the votes cast.
- ³⁴British Social Attitudes survey 2004, Q214
- ³⁵Demonstrated for example by the “quiz question” test in the British Social Attitudes survey 2003, Q572
- ³⁶The Synovate survey for the Countryside Agency (2005) also found that urban sparse areas are a little more likely than average to feel that decision makers do not understand their local problems, and are most likely to feel that local authorities and councillors, and parish and town councils, are “no good” at getting things done. However, this may reflect particular local issues with some of the small number of councils involved rather than a general problem.
- ³⁷BMRB/CRC Rural Disadvantage Survey, November-December 2005
- ³⁸British Social Attitudes survey 2004, Q342
- ³⁹British Social Attitudes survey 2004, Q400-402
- ⁴⁰British Social Attitudes survey 2004, Q406
- ⁴¹Ipsos MORI interviewed 126 MPs face-to-face on 31 October – 19 December 2005, of whom 101 MPs were asked the Commission for Rural Communities’ questions (53 Labour, 37 Conservative and 11 Others). Data have been weighted where necessary to reflect the true balance by party and ministerial or spokesperson position.



Commission for
Rural Communities
Tackling rural disadvantage

 An operating division of the Countryside Agency