

1 Defining rural settlements

What is a rural settlement?

It is difficult to give a simple definition. A simplistic, traditional view is that rural settlements are relatively small in size with old thatched stone houses and most of the population employed in agriculture. This may be the case in some remote areas or in LEDCs but in the twenty-first century it cannot be said of many villages and small market towns, especially in MEDCs.

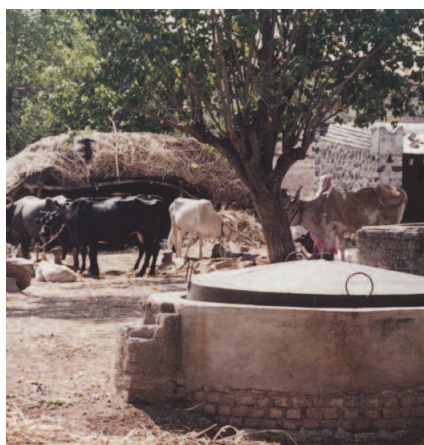
The problem of definition exists because of the great variety of rural settlements. Rural settlements are closely related to the physical environments in which they are situated and to the rural economies of which they are part. In the UK alone, where there are many different landscapes and rural economies, rural settlements display marked differences in their built environments and in their socioeconomic structures.

The difficulty is compounded by the rapid social and economic changes that have taken place in many rural areas over the last 40 years. During this period, in MEDCs for example, the effects of internal migration have led to the differences between rural and urban societies becoming much more indistinct.

Activity 1

Figure 1.1

Six different rural settlements



Prasan Firodia

Ralegan Siddhi, India



Lizzie Barker

Hualcayan, Peru

Activity 1 (continued)



D. Barker

Brandeston, Suffolk, UK



D. Barker

Framlingham, Suffolk, UK



D. Barker

Hafod-y-Llan, Gwynedd



D. Barker

Cleland, Barbados

Study Figure 1.1, which shows six different rural settlements. Identify the characteristics of each of the settlements shown and suggest reasons for the differences.

Each characteristic on its own is not adequate as a measure or defining characteristic of a rural settlement. The more frequently cited indices in defining rural settlements are outlined below.

Indices used in the definition of rural (and urban) settlements

Population size

Most countries have established a clear distinction between rural and urban settlements on the basis of population size. In many Latin American and west African countries, a rural settlement has 2000 people or less; the figure for Iceland and Norway is 200; in the Czech Republic it is 2000; in the USA it is 2500; and in Italy a rural settlement has a population below 10 000.

Clearly there is much global variation and the figures appear to be arbitrary. In most instances the definition is not that simple. Often it is linked to the specific problems and planning issues of a particular country.

For example, in India the definition is complex. Urban populations are defined first; the remainder are designated as rural. All populations living within a specified urban authority (such as a municipal corporation or a cantonment board) are treated as urban. In addition, an urban area must have a minimum population of 5000; 75% of the male working population must be engaged in non-agricultural employment; and the population density must be at least 400 km⁻².

In the USA, largely because of rapid change in the rural–urban fringe, revision of the urban/rural definition has been necessary at each decennial census. Since 1950, the USA has adopted the concept of the urbanised area (UA), which has a minimum of 50 000 persons. In addition, other delineated places called urban clusters (UC), which have at least 2500 persons, are ‘urban’ if they include contiguous densely settled territory of at least 1000 people per square mile. Therefore ‘rural’ consists of all territory, population and housing units outside the UAs and UCs.

Population structure

Rural settlements may have a distinctive age–sex structure, but there is no single generic type. Population structure tends to be related to the in- or out-migration that has affected the rural settlement. For example, there could be evidence of ageing in rural settlements affected by either depopulation or retirement migration. Similarly, rural settlements close to the rural–urban fringe may have a more youthful population structure as a result of counterurbanisation. Rural settlements have traditionally had a more homogeneous ethnic structure than urban areas; this has also changed in the last 30 years.

Employment structure

In urban areas, secondary and tertiary employment is more significant than primary employment. Because of the traditional economy of most rural areas, the employment structure of rural settlements has been dominated by primary activity — for example, farming, forestry and mining. While this may still be the case today in remoter rural settlements of MEDCs (and in the subsistence societies of LEDCs), the pattern is changing. In countries such as the USA and the UK, there has been a distinct shift in the employment structure of many villages within commuting distance of large urban areas. Increased personal mobility and improved public transport systems have enabled many new rural residents to travel to work, retaining their tertiary employment in the city.

Service provision

An obvious feature of rural settlements is that they tend to have fewer shops and services than urban areas; there is less demand and threshold populations cannot be met. Rural settlements are also likely to have a higher proportion of low-order shops than urban areas. A greater proportion of high-order functions, such as hospitals, and shops selling durable items, tends to be found in urban settlements. The number and type of shops and services (or a related measure, such as total retail floor space) is a useful basis for classification of rural settlements within the settlement hierarchy. However, there are anomalies. Can you explain why?

Social characteristics

The social characteristics of rural settlements are not easy to define either. The traditional village was said to have a strong community spirit compared with the more diverse populations of urban areas. Until about 1960, villagers in the UK conducted their lives in similar ways (for example, in their patterns of behaviour, such as going to church) and they had similar attitudes towards change. There would be strong family ties and limited movement. This has broken down in many instances: the village may have expanded; some newcomers may have been a source of social conflict; urban attitudes and lifestyles may have been imported. Is it possible to quantify or measure these characteristics? How useful are they in identifying rural settlements and rurality?

Land use

Definitions are just as difficult in terms of land use. Land use surrounding rural settlements tends to be mainly agricultural, extensive, and of limited variety. Around an urban area, the demands of the urban population may have led to greater diversity in the surrounding land use: recreation, new roads, modern industry, business parks and superstores.

Activity 2

Figure
1.2

The small market town of Framlingham, Suffolk in 1953



© English Heritage

Study Figure 1.2. Describe the characteristic features of Framlingham in 1953. In what ways might this small market town have changed as a result of population growth in the last 40 years?

Rurality

The definition of a rural area or rural region is just as problematic as that of the individual rural settlement. The term **rurality** is used to describe the degree to which an area is rural rather than urban. An index of rurality, taking into account 16 different indices, was devised by Paul Cloke (1977) ('An Index of Rurality for England and Wales', *Regional Studies*, Vol. 11, pp. 31–46). This was initially based on 1971 census data. Examples of measures used include: distance from a town with a population of over 50 000; occupational structure; retired population; population density; and commuter population. As a result, in addition to the 'urban' category, four different types of rural area were identified: 'extreme rural'; 'intermediate rural'; 'intermediate non-rural'; and 'extreme non-rural'. By mapping these areas, a rurality map of England and Wales was produced. This work was updated by Cloke and Edwards, and by Harrington and O'Donoghue, after the 1981 and 1991 censuses respectively.

This research has led to the development of a useful model — that is, the degree of rurality varies spatially in a continuum from urban area to remote countryside. The two rural extremes are described in Table 1.1. In reality, in England and Wales, this continuum is not one of regular change; there are many anomalies. Similar difficulties of definition have been experienced in the USA. The US Census Bureau confirmed this seemingly intractable problem in its definition for the 1990 census, stating: ‘there is both urban and rural territory within both metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas’.

Table 1.1 Characteristics of ‘extreme rural’ and ‘extreme non-rural’

Extreme rural: problematical remote rural areas	Extreme non-rural: extreme urban pressure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Areas tend to be remote from large urban centres ● A relatively low percentage of the population commutes to work ● There is out-migration, a low percentage of young working population and a high percentage of elderly ● Land use is predominantly related to primary activity, especially agriculture ● The area may be protected as part of a national park ● The rural settlements may be largely unaltered in their physical structure ● There is a relatively high proportion of second homes, declining service provision and rural deprivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● This type of area is close to the urban district, often located in the rural–urban fringe ● A high proportion of the population commutes to work, living in dormitory settlements ● The age structure includes mainly young working ages ● Land use is a mixture of agriculture and a high proportion of recreational usage around the city, such as sports centres, golf courses, equestrian centres ● This area may include green-belt land ● Residents of the villages have a high degree of personal mobility and command high wages ● Village services decline, since many residents shop in the urban area or out of town

Can you suggest any other indices that would help in the definition of rural settlements and the degree of rurality?

Tranquillity

Could tranquillity be equated with rurality? Tranquillity is assessed by the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE). This organisation has devised a tranquillity score based on 44 factors. The newspaper article in Figure 1.3 outlines some of the relevant issues.

Figure
1.3Newspaper article (*The Times*, 10 September 2007)

How the spread of towns reduced England's green and peaceful land

The English countryside is shrinking rapidly, and much of it could disappear within 80 years unless there are curbs on new developments.

Alarm over the loss of undisturbed areas of the landscape is being raised today by the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE). It has commissioned new maps charting the pace of construction that has changed the landscape since the early 1960s.

The striking images show that almost 50 per cent of England is now disturbed by roads, industrial developments, out-of-town retail and business parks and new housing estates.

The "intrusion" maps show exactly how the growth in motorways and roads, power stations, airports, railway lines, power lines, wind farms, mines and quarries has affected the countryside.

According to the CRPE, only 26 per cent of England's land area had been disturbed by urban intrusion before the 1960s. This grew to 41 per cent by the early 1990s, and this year to almost 50 per cent, 25,614 square miles (66,399 sq km). The extent of incursion may be even greater, however, as the mapping exercise did not take into account the impact of aircraft noise.

The maps show that the main area of remaining, undisturbed countryside is in the National Parks — Dartmoor, Exmoor, the Yorkshire Dales, the North York Moors, the Lake District and Northumberland — which have strong planning controls. There are also large swaths of deep, unfragmented countryside along the Marches of Herefordshire and Shropshire, and in the North Pennines.

Land in the South East is under the most pressure. In the past decade, 320 square miles (830 sq km) of countryside have been affected by the impact of new developments, the equivalent of building over the area of Greater London every two years.

The CPRE is publishing the maps in the hope that they help to rein in the Government's shake-up of the planning system. Gordon Brown has

signalled that a planning reform Bill will be included in the next legislative programme. The reforms would make it easier to build new infrastructure, particularly controversial new airports, and expand existing sites.

51,300

square miles, England's land mass

13,100

square miles, affected by development before the 1960s

20,820

square miles in 1990s

25,614

square miles affected by noise or visual intrusion today

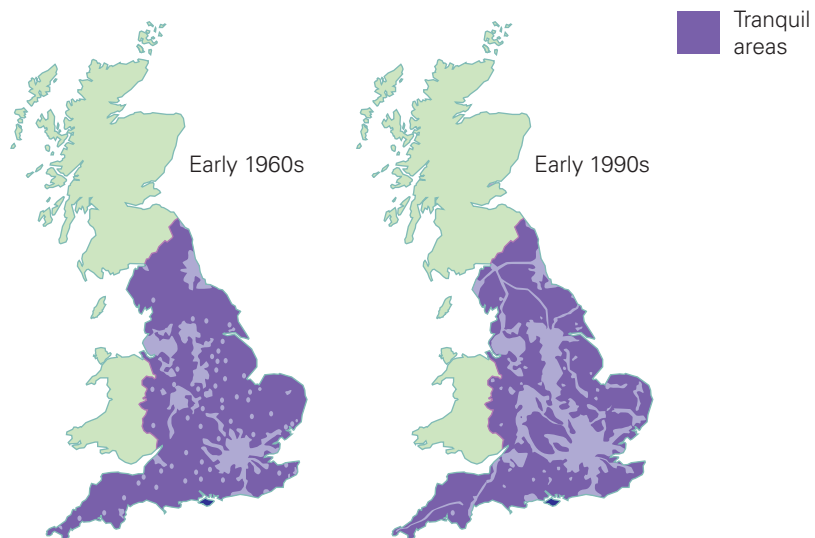
Campaigners want ministers to recognise that the countryside is diminishing, and that building on only 1 or 2 per cent of existing countryside would have a significant effect on the character of the landscape. The CPRE is calling for more building on brown-field sites, and for greater promotion of public transport. Shaun Spiers, the group's chief executive, said: "The countryside is one of our greatest national assets. I am sure that the Government wants to protect it — but these maps show the current pace of development is seriously eroding our countryside.

He added: "The impact of development spreads way beyond its immediate footprint. More must be done to protect what is left from further fragmentation.

"The Government must act across the board to demonstrate that it takes the future of the countryside seriously. Unless it does so, for children alive today, much of our remaining undisturbed countryside will become a distant memory in their lifetimes."

Do the maps produced by CPRE (Figure 1.4) help to distinguish between rural and urban areas?

Figure 1.4 Erosion of England's tranquillity



Activity 3

Study Figure 1.4.

- With reference to the two maps shown in Figure 1.4, describe the changes in the pattern of tranquil areas in England between the early 1960s and the early 1990s.
- Visit the website of the Campaign to Protect Rural England at: www.cpre.org.uk/home By following the sequence Campaigns, Landscape, Tranquillity, and then National and regional tranquillity maps, you can find the most recent map of your area. Describe the differences between the map of your region on this site and the map for the early 1990s in Figure 1.4.
- Using the newspaper article in Figure 1.3, suggest reasons for the changes described in (b).

Why is it important to define rural areas?

Authorities need detailed information when preparing management plans for rural areas. These plans are essential in sustaining natural environments and local and regional economies. They are more effective if rural areas and the types of

socioeconomic problems within them (often highly localised) can be identified accurately. Two examples — the Czech Republic and England and Wales — illustrate this point.

The Czech Republic

Since the Czech Republic's accession to the EU in 2004, the Czech government has been able to divert more funding to its Agriculture and Rural Development Plan. The classification adopted (Table 1.2) has been fundamental in the correct allocation of funds for rural development.

Table 1.2 The structure of settlements according to size in the Czech Republic, 2005

Size of settlement	Number of settlements	% of settlements	Population in settlements	% of population
Up to 199	1633	26.14	200 534	1.96
200–499	2012	32.20	653 740	6.40
500–999	1293	20.69	901 546	8.82
1000–1499	449	7.19	545 888	5.34
1500–1999	225	3.60	387 968	3.80
Total 'villages'	5612	89.82	2 689 676	26.32 rural
2000–4999	368	5.89	1 122 262	10.98
5000–9999	137	2.19	932 726	9.13
10 000–19 999	68	1.09	955 227	9.35
20 000–49 999	42	0.67	1 250 363	12.23
50 000–99 999	16	0.26	1 157 242	11.32
100 000+	4	0.06	942 510	9.22
Prague	1	0.02	1 170 571	11.45
Total 'towns'	636	10.18	7 530 901	73.68 urban
Total Czech Rep.	6248	100	10 220 577	100

Source: Czech Statistical Office

Table 1.2 shows that in 2005, settlements of less than 2000 people were classified as rural. Under this classification, the country has 5612 rural settlements (i.e. nearly 90% of all Czech settlements) containing 2.69 million people (26.3% of the Czech population). The size categories appear to be arbitrary, but in fact they have been established using a complex set of socioeconomic indices. This classification is important, since it has enabled grants to be allocated correctly to the rural areas specifically in need of development.

England and Wales

An even more detailed classification of rural and urban areas was devised in a government project in 2004. It was sponsored by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), the Countryside Agency (CA), the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the National Assembly for Wales (NAW). This project, coordinated by Birkbeck College, University of London, is a complicated classification based on many indices. Economic, social and demographic characteristics have been recorded for every hectare in England and Wales. In addition, every hectare has been given a 'sparsity score' depending on the density of households. Using this information, each census Output Area (2001) has been classified as urban or rural. Further details can be found at: www.statistics.gov.uk/geography/nrudp.asp

Information at this scale is important in ensuring that planning policies can be applied consistently in rural areas throughout England and Wales. Often, rural problems do not affect an entire rural area uniformly. For example, rural poverty can be hidden in small pockets. Identification of problem areas at this small scale enables specific and effective application of rural planning policies.

An example of the use of this classification at county level can be found on the Suffolk County Council website at: www.suffolkcc.gov.uk. Suffolk County Council has mapped and graphed its Output Areas according to this classification (see Figures 1.5 and 1.6). This has been of great value in the implementation of planning policies in the county's rural districts.

Figure 1.5 Classification of rural and urban areas in Suffolk, 2005

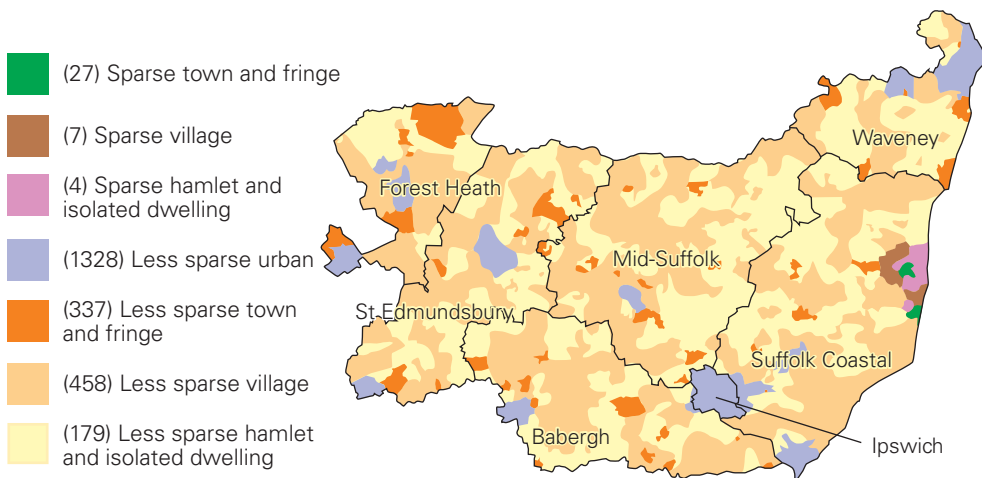
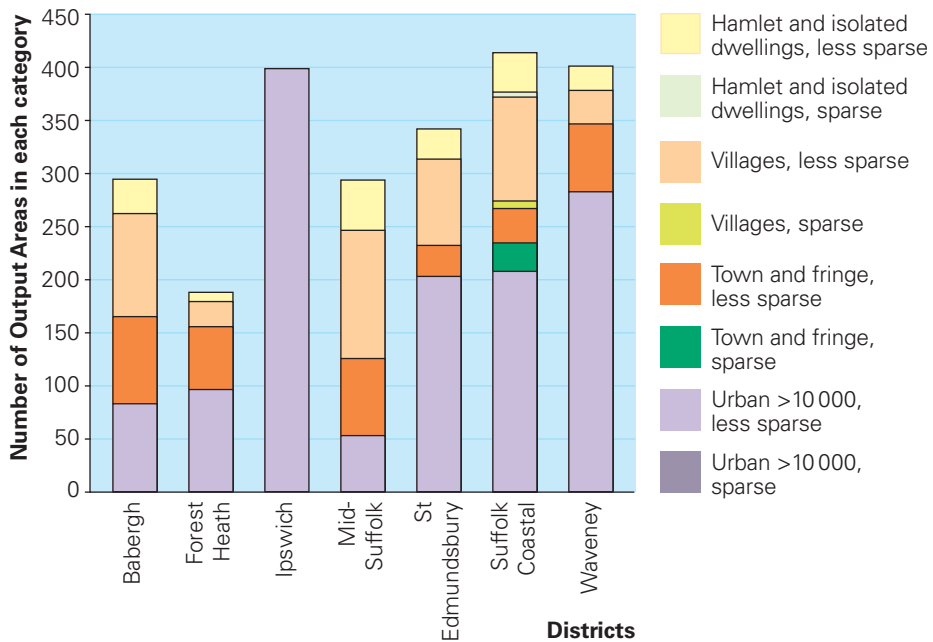


Figure
1.6

Classification of rural and urban areas in Suffolk, 2005



Key statistics are identified for each of the Output Areas and this enables detailed mapping of specific social characteristics in rural areas. Age structure, for example, is one type of data that can be related to the planning policies of Suffolk County Council. In this case, accurate identification of the spatial patterns of different age groups has helped in planning the delivery of services such as schools and public transport.

Rural settlement systems

Even though definition is a problem, use of a simple systems approach gives some commonality to the characteristics of rural settlements and the relationships between them. Rural settlements are open process–response systems — for example, they are related to the physical and economic environments in which they have evolved and they are also linked to other settlements within the hierarchy.

Inputs into the system include physical, demographic, socioeconomic and political influences; one of the most obvious is that of in-migration. These are, in effect, the processes of change, which affect the state of dynamic equilibrium within the rural settlement system. Another example is planning policies.

Outputs include the response to change. These are often evident in the specific characteristics of the settlement as it exists today, for example its built environment and its demographic structure. Other outputs might include out-migration of population to another system (perhaps urban) or physical expansion of housing estates impinging on both farming and hydrological systems. Population and services can be viewed as two examples of stores, in a state of flux, within such a system.

Many natural systems have self-adjusting mechanisms or negative feedback loops that respond to change and restore balance. In the case of the rural settlement, change such as population growth or decline is more likely to lead to further change or positive feedback unless planning responses are very successful.

Personal fieldwork investigations

Rural settlement systems can provide the basis for interesting personal investigations. Many relevant geographical themes and issues (such as migration, population structure, land use, shop and service provision, status within the hierarchy, socioeconomic characteristics and attitudes of residents) can be pursued in the context of recent change.

Possible titles for coursework with differing degrees of difficulty include:

- How and why has village V changed since 1960?
- To what extent does village W conform to the Hudson model (see Figure 7.6 on page 120) of change in a rural settlement?
- How and why do the social and economic characteristics of (three or four) rural settlements vary with distance from a large urban area?
- An evaluation of the impact of depopulation/counterurbanisation on settlement X.
- What factors have influenced the distribution of service Y in rural area Z in the last 20 years?