

Proposal for a Rural Services Evidence Centre

Recent years have witnessed the closure of the Commission for Rural Communities, Defra's Rural Evidence Research Centre and the Wales Rural Observatory, which has dramatically reduced the volume of research and analysis undertaken on the rural economy and rural society in England and Wales. In addition, public sector cuts have made it more difficult for local authorities to continue to undertake analysis of changing conditions in their areas. This has been particularly the case in rural areas where local government has traditionally had more limited research capacity. Consequently, at a time when austerity is impacting on the ability of local authorities to provide essential services to their populations, there exists little meaningful evidence on the impacts of budgetary cuts in rural places and, more specifically, on vulnerable groups in these places.

The studies that have been undertaken on the rural impacts of austerity have been largely speculative in nature, conducted in the immediate years following the banking crisis in 2008. These also provided conflicting assessments of the likely impacts of austerity on rural areas; some claimed that rural places were more resilient to public sector cuts due to the more limited reliance of rural populations on the local welfare state, while others pointed to the increased vulnerability of rural localities resulting from reduced levels of (social) service provision in many places.

There exists a need to provide an improved evidence base on the state of rural service provision in the different countries of the UK. What is proposed here is a joint working arrangement between academic researchers and local authorities involved in the Rural Services Network to undertake analysis and research on the state of rural service provision across the four countries of the UK. It is suggested that the initial focus would be on the rural impacts of public sector cuts, providing new datasets that could be used by RSN members for a variety of purposes.

The Rural Services Evidence Centre would begin by pooling existing staff and analytical resources rather than seeking external funding. This would involve the sharing of current statistical data, research findings and policy reports on relevant rural themes held by RSN members with the academic team in an effort to produce robust assessments of the state of service provision and the impacts of public sector cuts across rural areas. Following on from this, on-line surveys of rural local authorities would be undertaken on a regular basis to provide evidence of the changing nature of rural service provision. The researchers would supply Network members with briefing reports from these surveys. Bespoke analyses could also be undertaken. The researchers would disseminate evidence from the surveys more widely through the production of research reports and academic outputs.

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