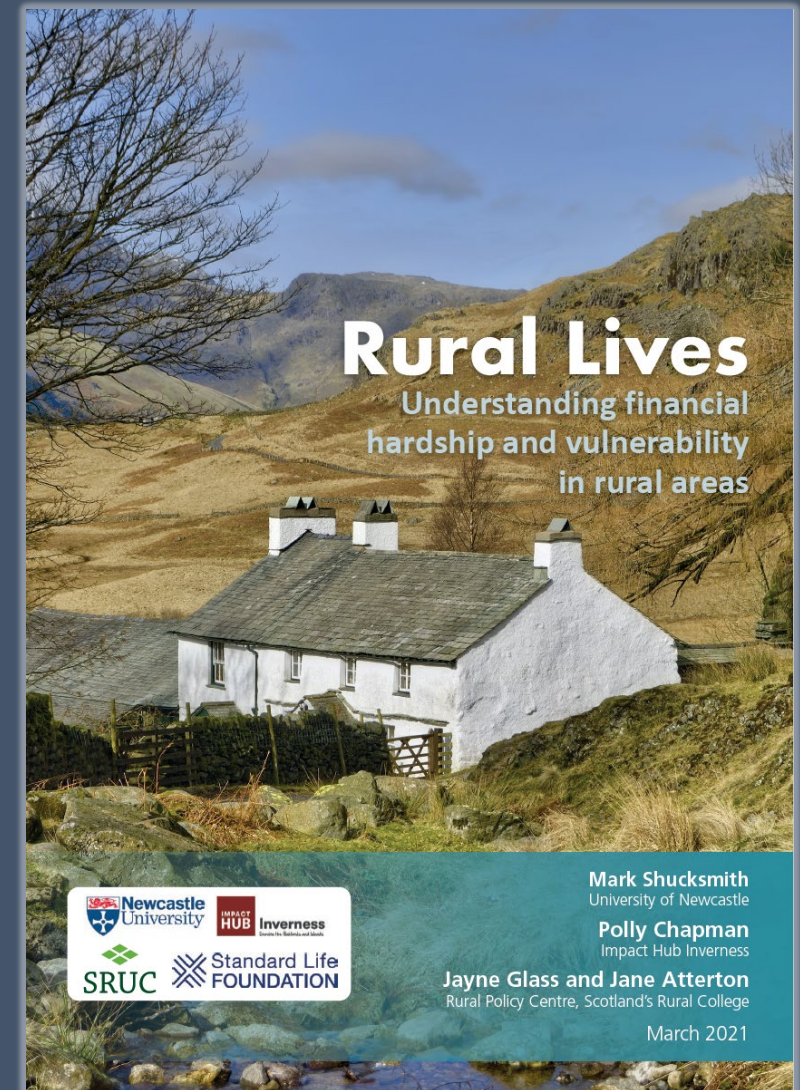# Rural Lives
Understanding Financial Hardship and Vulnerability in Rural Areas

Mark Shucksmith, Polly Chapman, Jayne Glass, Jane Atterton

Rural Vulnerability Day, 24th June 2021

Outline:

- Introduction to the Project
- Conceptual Framework
- Key Findings
- Challenges and Policy opportunities
- Discussion

Rural Lives
Understanding financial hardship and vulnerability in rural areas

Mark Shucksmith
University of Newcastle

Polly Chapman
Impact Hub Inverness

Jayne Glass and Jane Atterton
Rural Policy Centre, Scotland's Rural College

March 2021

Conceptual framework

• Four systems of support…….

Methods:

• Literature review

• Secondary data analysis

• 3 study areas

• Gatekeeper interviews

• Individual interviews

• Focus groups

• Validation

Key Findings

Changing rural economies

- Considerable structural change
- Job insecurity and 'precariatisation'
- Low pay and unpredictable work
- Limited opportunities – employers and career progression
- Self employment
- Link to housing, childcare and public transport
- Higher cost of living, fuel poverty

"Certainly here, it's seasonal work. It's low-paid work, zero hours contracts and a lot of it is in the tourism/hospitality sector."

"It's very, very difficult for a young person here to get anywhere really. There's a lack of well-paid jobs. It's all kind of either tourism or fishing or building or stuff like that.")

The welfare state in rural areas

Same issues as urban dwellers but compounded by rurality

- Multiple jobs/seasonality -> irregular and volatile incomes
- Centralisation of job centres and welfare services
- Increased visibility and stigma
- Distance to work capability assessment centres
- Digital exclusion: online systems for claiming and surveillance
- Close link between delays in UC, debt, foodbank use and mental health

"At the moment I'm supporting two women wo, in the last two years, one was made redundant and the other has run out of money… So I've been supporting them getting onto Universal Credit, but in order to do that (neither of them has internet at home) I've had to meet them on a park bench. We had a really bad time of trying to get on to the gov.uk Universal Credit website where you can sign on. So neither of these two women would have got signed on without that and they're both absolutely bankrupt, they're both penniless ." (North Tyne Valley, voluntary organisation)

Voluntary and community organisations

- Funding cuts and shift to competitive tendering (neoliberalisation)

- Sector under pressure

- But sector still very strong in rural areas, and very significant

- Often first port of call for those in financial hardship

- Delivery across large geographies a challenge – high reliance on volunteers

- Importance of community development trusts and land trusts

"I have had people arrive on my doorstep over the years, knock on the door and say, 'I just can't understand how to fill this in'. That's alright though. I mean, that's the sort of thing I'm here for."

"As resources are getting tighter, services are going to become more and more centralised, leaving those people who are living out in rural areas even more isolated and even more vulnerable."

Family, friends and neighbours

- Important source of help but important how help is offered
- Unequal access and regional differences – social norms and social connections very important
- For housing, work, care, transport….
- Coping strategies – budgeting, frugality, foodbanks, jumble sales…

"You don't get work around here until you know people." (Perthshire)

"I feel more that, with the community that I'm most heavily involved in, people would notice if there was an issue. And actually, there are people within that community that would offer that help, if they thought it was necessary." (North Tyne Valley)

"Sometimes [people] don't ask for help from their families simply because the family is in exactly the same situation." (Perthshire)

Rural poverty in a pandemic

- Economic impact – businesses and individuals, and young people
- Claimant rates in rural areas
- Helped reveal hidden poverty
- Impact on children and schooling because of poor connectivity
- Help and support

"Before lockdown, I used to go in and sit with them, have a drink with them, a cup of coffee or a cup of tea with other people that use the foodbank. And the different walks of life that you see in there. People that have gone from having loads of money and they've hit rock bottom. You just sit and you talk about your problems. [...] it's stress relief. It helps you for that day. It helps you get through it." (North Tyne Valley, individual)

Challenges and
Policy opportunities

RURAL LIVES

Challenges and Policy opportunities

- Many rural residents are at risk of poverty, but relevant policies are often not well adjusted to rural contexts.

  - National policy development should be informed by local knowledge and local practice, not only through the involvement of rural stakeholders in rural-proofing but also through mechanisms in government for continuous learning and policy refinement from local experience.
  - In rural contexts, we need to learn how to combine *person-based* and *place-based* measures more effectively (e.g. to increase claimant rates, signposting to support).
  - VCSEs offer different 'entry' points to the welfare system, often substituting for roles the state performs in urban contexts.

Challenges and Policy opportunities

- ## The welfare system is not well adapted to rural lives.

  - Rural-proofing of the welfare system by DWP, with support from DEFRA, local government and relevant stakeholders is required to address issues highlighted in this report.
  - Ensure *face-to-face provision* of welfare advice and support alongside *digital or phone provision*, even in the most rural areas.
  - Better funding of advice and support organisations to cover the additional costs of reaching into rural areas – a vital component of social infrastructure.
  - Gathering and sharing information on how the welfare system performs in rural areas is an essential part of rural-proofing process.

Challenges and Policy opportunities

- How can organisations 'reach' into rural areas?

  - VCSEs are filling gaps where public sector support has been withdrawn, as cost pressures have led to services being centralised or digitalized. But VCSEs also face challenges of reduced funding and volunteer recruitment.
  - Reinstating/supporting mobile and outreach face-to-face services for the most vulnerable requires additional financial support and joint working.
  - We found many good examples of joint working between public sector and VCSE outreach services to reach rural residents facing financial hardship, through lunch clubs, warm hubs, libraries and GP surgeries, for example.
  - Rural residents (especially the most vulnerable) need a plurality of means of accessing services – face-to-face, mobile, digital and phone services.

Challenges and Policy opportunities

- Much rural work is not 'good work' or 'fair work'
  Low and irregular wages, insecure contracts, lack of childcare, training and skills.

- Barriers to entering self-employment and starting microbusinesses
  Support for microbusinesses which are not primarily growth-oriented.

- How can financially vulnerable access affordable rural housing?
  Long-standing policy challenge. A place-based and locally-informed approach?

- An imminent crisis in rural social care
  Any proposed new national policy for social care provision should be rural-proofed so it takes account of higher rural costs, staff recruitment and other rural aspects. This is especially important with our older rural population.

Challenges and Policy opportunities

- Creating a sense of hope around a shared vision
    - Narratives of loss and social change were present in all our study areas, alongside some more hopeful discourses.
    - Can we support communities to build positive narratives of place and change – from the bottom-up and including *all* voices? Creating a sense of hope around a shared vision, reflecting both continuity and change, is important and could draw on lessons from LEADER and other community-based approaches.
    - Encouraging the community ownership of revenue-bearing assets, such as affordable housing or renewable energy, can strengthen community-based organisations and give them greater power and resilience to pursue their own agreed objectives – as we have seen in Scotland's community land movement.

Some Reflections to conclude…

- We can see the impacts in rural areas of structural processes of change, notably flexibilisation of labour markets, changes in economies, neoliberalisation, welfare conditionality and individualisation and rescaling of social risk.

- We also found 'intersectionality' in terms of impacts.

- The vital importance of voluntary and community organisations is evident, though these face challenges too.

- There is emergent agency at local level, which could be supported, while tackling the set of broader policy challenges identified.

- This conceptual framework has helped in understanding sources of support, how these are changing, who may be excluded from accessing these, and how they might be improved.

Discussion

The full report and a supplementary report on experiences during the pandemic are available at www.rurallives.co.uk