

TOPIC FOR THE MAIN RURAL ENGLAND RESEARCH PROJECT IN 2022/23

Note for the Rural England Stakeholder Group meeting in July 2022

Rural England CIC needs to agree the topic for its main research project to be carried out during 2022/23 using the income derived from its funding supporters. In 2021/22 it produced the State of Rural Services (SORS) 2021 report, which focused on the impacts of the pandemic on service use and provision. It has already been agreed that the preference is to follow up in 2022/23 with a project which explores, in more depth, a finding from the SORS report. This note briefly outlines some options that Rural England's Directors and its Research Director have considered, and it makes a recommendation. However, we would welcome the views of the Stakeholder Group. Our aim is to produce a project plan this summer, so the research can commence shortly after.

Options

We identified and considered four topic options. Among our considerations were:

- How policy relevant and timely is the topic?
- How might the topic be researched (methodology)?
- How achievable is that within modest funding resources (£8,500)?
- Are other organisations already known to be researching the topic?

Our assessment of the four topic options was:

1. **Assessment of rural town high streets recovery:** the SORS report found that some rural town high streets had lost few shops/businesses and were recovering relatively well (notably in tourist areas), but the picture was variable and other rural towns might need further support. It would be interesting to explore this in more detail and a year-on, to understand the longer-term implications of the pandemic on these rural service and employment centres. Such a project would have obvious relevance to the levelling up agenda, including the Towns Fund and Future High Streets Fund. Findings should be useful, since those funds have largely overlooked small rural towns. It might also use case studies to assess (from interviews) the response by Town Councils, business associations and local partnerships. It should be relatively straightforward to survey and/or recruit rural towns to the project through the RSN Town and Larger Councils Group (who we surveyed for SORS).
2. **Assessment of rural pubs sustainability post-pandemic:** the SORS report found that pubs had been impacted considerably and negatively by the pandemic, causing further closures in some cases. Although most rural pubs re-opened, they likely still face challenges, such as recruiting/retaining staff, supply chains and rising inflation. Higher living costs will also be reducing the disposable income of their customers. All this might make it more attractive to convert pub buildings into housing. It could be interesting to revisit the state of rural pubs in 2022 and the challenges they face, as well as any lessons for their survival and sustainability. However, other organisations are gathering information about this topic, not least those with a specialist sector interest such as CAMRA and BBPA. A related concern was how easy it would be, in practice, to recruit pubs to take part in the project. Finally, there was some concern that the topic felt too specific.

3. **Impact of migration to and home working from rural areas:** it is widely reported that the pandemic caused an increase in house moves to rural locations. In some cases, movers appear to have retained jobs with urban-based employers whilst working (partly or wholly) from their now-rural home. It would be interesting to explore the implications of this trend, including what benefits and disbenefits it brings to local rural areas (their economies, services, housing markets, etc). That may well vary depending on the characteristic of the mover, the type of rural location and other factors. This has the advantage of being a topic with potential long term and significant consequences for rural areas. However, it is also quite a complex topic given the limited resources available for this project. We could access housing market data fairly easily, but a wider project would be desirable to look at the other implications (positive and negative) e.g. for service outlets. Some clarity would be needed about what we'd do with the findings.

4. **Rural cost of living rises and its implications:** although not directly related to the SORS report, rising inflation and its impacts on the cost of living and poverty was considered as a very timely concern. Huge increases in the cost of home heating bills and of fuel for personal transport have obvious rural dimensions to them. There is potentially interesting research to explore the implications for rural households and especially lower-income households. An obvious complexity could be finding households willing to be interviewed about a sensitive topic, assuming that is part of the methodology. A further question is whether this is the best time to start such a project, since the full impact of cost increases may not become apparent until Winter 2022/23, after the price cap on home heating bills is reviewed again and colder weather arrives. Significantly, the Rural Services Network has already commissioned some analysis on this topic which will be available later this year.

Recommendation

Directors recommend that the main project for 2022/23 focusses on rural high streets and their recovery. This is practical, politically timely, doable within resources and should not present any significant methodology issues. Directors thought that (high street) pubs could usefully be considered within the scope of this project.

However, they recognised the probably import of the migration and home working trends to the future of rural areas. Rural England Directors (including the Director who is part of the NICRE team) therefore intend to hold a meeting to consider whether there is some other way to progress a project or support a project on this topic, drawing upon other resources.

Members of the Stakeholder Group are asked:

- a) Whether they would endorse this recommendation?
- b) What further comments they have about the recommended or other project options?
- c) Whether any of them would be willing to join a small project Task & Finish Group?

Such a group would be consulted or asked for comments at a few key points during the project. This could probably happen by email, though an online meeting is not ruled out.

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10th June 2022