

## The role of rural settlements as service centres

**How are changes in the way we live affecting England's market towns?**

**Current approaches to rural settlement and service planning are just too simplistic. Modern rural lives are more complex than they anticipate.**

### Summary

This research set out to address important questions concerning towns and villages in the modern countryside. What are the services that rural residents use, and where are they located? Where do rural residents work? How do these things vary from place to place? How do modern rural settlements **function**?

These questions are set against a policy background that has regarded rural settlements hierarchically for years. Most development has been directed to the larger settlements. Two key reasons for pursuing such an approach are evident across contemporary planning policy: to bolster services in larger villages and market towns, and to reduce car travel.

But as the population of rural England has grown rural services have declined and rural car use has increased apace. This is the paradox for prevailing policy that this research attempts to unravel.

The major findings of this work are that:

- simplistic assumptions about settlement hierarchy, and particularly of hinterlands to market towns, fall worryingly short of the reality of behaviour of rural residents;
- the lives of most rural residents are characterised by high levels of mobility and dispersal of activity;
- the influence of near and further urban neighbouring settlements on rural residents is significant;
- the journey patterns of residents for various services and for work are very different;
- the journey patterns of village residents differ markedly from those of market town residents, both for service use and for work;
- market towns are likely, on the whole, to still have roles as service centres for their own population and for surrounding villages but the nature and scale of these roles will vary;
- the use of evidence to underpin a range of policy and programmes involving rural settlement planning is rare;
- the use of appropriate evidence to underpin a range of policy and programmes involving rural settlement planning is essential if their functional roles are to be understood sufficiently to plan for their futures effectively and sustainably.

These findings are challenging to current approaches to rural settlement and service planning. They do not mean that they are just wrong – more that they are insufficiently sophisticated to capture the complexity and diversity of the rural lives that they seek to influence.

# The Countryside Agency research notes

Rural residents appear to live significantly different work and service 'lives'.

People in surrounding villages are much less functionally 'attached' to their local market town than town residents. They travel further and more widely to use services and to work.

## Main findings

Eight towns and notional hinterlands were selected from across England to cover a variety of rural situations<sup>1</sup>.

Local policy and existing data were examined for what they could explain about settlement function. But the bulk of the research effort was deployed on survey work. 1552 household interviews were undertaken, stratified across the towns and villages.

Perhaps the most valuable findings are the patterning of the lives of the respondent households for service use and employment - where individual households **actually** go to access services and facilities and where they **actually** work in relation to where they live. It is these decisions that settlement strategy assumes to understand and hopes to influence. Households were asked about:

- main food shopping at major supermarkets\*
- main food shopping, not at major supermarkets\*
- top-up/convenience food shopping\*
- non food shopping\*
- further education/training – e.g. attending college
- pre-school childcare/nursery/playgroup
- children's primary/secondary school
- children's social activities
- banking, financial, professional services
- use of health service (GP, dentist etc)
- use of leisure/recreation/cultural facilities\*
- socialising (visiting/meeting friends/relatives)\*
- work\*

The patterns of service use and employment with an asterisk\* were mapped, allowing the spatial pattern of use of services to be readily appreciated.

### Shopping

Clear differences emerge for the different types of shopping. Market towns are generally still significant for local shopping, and perform more strongly as service centres for other main food and top up and convenience shopping, but least strongly for non-food shopping.

The significance of supermarket shopping is more variable and, with non-food shopping, demonstrates the draw of neighbouring urban centres and large towns, as a competing attraction to residents of both rural towns and villages.

As for use of other services it is a clear feature across the findings that the **villages** are significantly less 'attached' to the towns than policy supposes.

### Education and children's activities, health services

The patterns of use for education and health services tend to be relatively localised, partly reflecting the nature of public provision of these services.

### Banking, finance and professional services

Use of these services is also relatively localised and focused on the market towns. This is an encouraging finding for their modern service role as these are not public services.

### Leisure and socialising

The patterning of use of leisure facilities and of socialising produced interesting findings. Essentially the towns have a stronger role for socialising than for the use of leisure facilities, including for the residents of surrounding villages.

<sup>1</sup> The towns were Balsall (Warwickshire), Haltwhistle (Northumberland), Marlborough (Wiltshire), Maltby (South Yorkshire), Okehampton (Devon), Ripon (North Yorkshire), Sheringham (Norfolk) and Whitchurch (Shropshire). A total of 43 surrounding villages of varying sizes made up the notional 'hinterlands'.

The three types of shopping; banking, financial and professional services; and social trips account for the majority of combined trips.

### Transport – the key issue?

Traffic on rural roads is growing faster than elsewhere. Rural residents make a similar number of trips to urban residents but these trips are longer and more often by car. These differentials are growing.

Arguably many of the travel patterns revealed in the findings would not be possible without cars. It is a small additional step to suggest that aspects of the contemporary car culture have caused them.

Department for Transport Data<sup>2</sup> reveals that since 1980 the real cost of motoring has fallen slightly, whereas the cost of bus and train travel have both increased by a third. At the same time disposable income has increased by four fifths.

So car travel is now effectively nearly twice as cheap as 20 years ago whereas bus and train travel are only around three quarters as cheap. It should not be surprising that rural residents have taken advantage of this situation and used their cars more.

The widespread 'strategic disobedience' this fosters is a clear result of other policy choices.

### Work

The patterning of employment locations is particularly enlightening. It is clear that both town and village residents to a significant extent lead different work and service 'lives'.

Journeys to work are longer than journeys for most services and the range of destinations more dispersed, particularly for village residents.

### Mode of access to services and work

The only two modes of any significance for access to services or work in the towns and villages are cars and walking. But there are important differences between the towns and villages.

79% of trips to services within the same village are walked, but it has to be remembered that village residents meet most of their service needs outside the village.

In contrast town residents meet a good proportion of their service needs from within the town. Thus the figure of 45% walking is much more significant.

73% of all trips to work are made by car, rising to 83% for the villages.

Cars are clearly the dominant mode of transport to services and work, particularly for the villages. The low level of bus use (less than 10%) is particularly striking.

## Discussion

### Service use

The notion of a market town as a unified 'service centre' for a notional hinterland appears particularly naive in the light of this research. Town and village residents make use of a variety of services in very different ways. Thus a town might have several service roles, and correspondingly service strengths and weaknesses.

This suggests that to be most effective policy and programmes should perhaps be more selective in seeking out those roles of a particular town where support will be most effective.

It is important to remember, though, that the variety of shops examined, and the banks, accountants, and many leisure and socialising venues all make up one 'high street' which arguably should be planned for as a single entity, despite its different roles.

### Work

Prevailing planning and employment policies clearly intend market towns to act as local employment centres and plan their growth accordingly. This is a 'sister' and connected policy aspiration to that supporting them as service centres.

The findings have far from entirely undermined this notion, but have emphasised that this role is probably significantly overplayed by current policy and varies significantly from place to place.

Town, but particularly village residents, travel further and to a wider range of destinations than policy expects.

Why? Two reasons may explain this. First, choice of place of residence may not be strongly connected with choice of work location. Second, the degree of cheap mobility 'on offer' to rural residents has never been greater - the glue binding together assumptions of hierarchical settlement relationships appears to be dissolving.

<sup>2</sup>(dft\_transstats\_506967)

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Most residents of towns and villages do not perceive that they have problems accessing services<sup>3</sup>. So the patterns of overall service use essentially indicate use preferences.

## Towns and villages

The research has revealed crucial differences between the towns and villages. Village residents appear to be less functionally 'attached' to their locality than market town residents and therefore travel further and more widely to use services and to work.

The significance of the villages to the service and employment role of the towns is in danger of being overplayed, particularly in more accessible locations. Conversely the significance of rural towns as service and employment centres for their own population is clearer. But the towns all 'leak' to a considerable degree, particularly for non-food shopping and leisure facility trips.

People in the villages are generally older, more affluent, remain resident there for longer, have held their jobs for longer, are more fully embedded in their local communities, are more likely to work from home, and use home delivery and internet services. Yet they also own and use more cars and make less use of local services or take local jobs.

This may suggest that village residents primarily choose their residence for quality of life reasons and then connect up the other aspects of their lives to suit, using the car.

In contrast the market towns, particularly the remoter ones, appear to have clear service and employment roles for their own populations.

This mixture of issues presents a fiendish set of problems for public policy to wrestle with.

## What next

The research has exposed the complexity of contemporary rural lives and the functional relationship of rural settlements, which this produces.

Increasing mobility, reduced localisation of service use and work, and weakening attachment of villages to 'their' towns – cut deeply against policy aspirations for market towns.

But market towns are still service centres in many respects. The challenge now is to understand the complexity of these modern roles and work with this 'grain' to secure their futures.

For this to happen future approaches to rural settlement planning should be based on a detailed understanding of how the individual rural settlements actually function – requiring an adequate evidence base.

National and regional policy, including planning policy, should recognise the diversity of settlement function and require local planning authorities to respond to it. Local initiatives such as the Market Towns Initiative and Parish Plans should be very useful in building up local understanding.

Last, but critically important, policy for transport in rural areas should address the positive and negative impacts of all modes of transport on rural settlements.

## Further reading

Land Use Consultants/SERRL/Emma Delow, *The role of rural settlements as service centres*, Final report to the Countryside Agency, January 2004.

Available at:

[www.countryside.gov.uk/livinglandscapes/positiveplanning/themes/sustainablecommunities/rural\\_settlements\\_final\\_report.asp](http://www.countryside.gov.uk/livinglandscapes/positiveplanning/themes/sustainablecommunities/rural_settlements_final_report.asp)

<sup>3</sup> In general only around 15% of all respondents have difficulties accessing services. This is generally higher in the villages and lower in the towns. The main reasons cited by village residents is poor public transport whereas in Ripon and Whitchurch more town residents identified access problems than village residents and the main reason was poor car parking.

**Countryside Agency Research Notes can also be viewed on our website:  
[www.countryside.gov.uk](http://www.countryside.gov.uk)**