



Department  
for Environment  
Food & Rural Affairs

[www.defra.gov.uk](http://www.defra.gov.uk)

## **Rural Communities Policy Unit and Rural Development Programme Evidence Plan**

**Policy portfolio: Rural Development Sustainable  
Communities and Crops**

**Policy area within portfolio: Rural Communities  
Policy Unit (RCPU) and Rural Development  
Programme Policy Team**

**Timeframe covered by Evidence Plan: 2013/14-2017/18**

**Date of Evidence Plan: March 2013**

This evidence plan was correct at the time of publication (March 2013). However, Defra is currently undertaking a review of its policy priorities and in some areas the policy, and therefore evidence needs, will continue to develop and may change quite rapidly. If you have any queries about the evidence priorities covered in this plan, please contact [StrategicEvidence@defra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:StrategicEvidence@defra.gsi.gov.uk).

© Crown copyright 2013

You may re-use this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/) or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or e-mail: [psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk)

PB13924

## Contents

1. Policy context.....	1
2. Current and near-term evidence objectives .....	2
3. Future evidence needs .....	4
4. Meeting evidence needs .....	6
5. Evaluating value for money and impact .....	8

# 1. Policy context

## What are the key policy outcomes for the policy programme/area?

The publication of the Government's Rural Statement sets out a positive new agenda for Rural England, to grow the rural economy and support thriving rural communities. Rural England is home to 9.8 million people (or 19% of the total population) and Gross Value Added from predominantly rural areas contributed to 19% of England's GVA, and is worth £205bn. The Government is committed to sustainable rural development and ensuring that rural people, businesses and communities are treated fairly in all Government policies, programmes and spending decisions. Defra has a strategic role as Rural Champion across Government, including Defra Ministers, to identify rural priority areas and oversee their pursuit.

Defra also manages the delivery of the current Rural Development Programme for England, 2007-2013. This provides the Department's main funding source for delivery of rural economic growth, but also helps to safeguard and enhance the rural environment and improve competitiveness in the agriculture and forestry sector<sup>1</sup>. The next Rural Development Programme in England, covering the 2014-2020 period is currently being developed.

To fulfil these roles, Defra continuously develops and maintains its evidence base so we clearly understand the needs and circumstance of people, business and communities in rural England and the impact and value for money of its investment in delivery of programmes.

This evidence plan has been largely informed through engagement with rural communities, their stakeholders and regular analysis and monitoring of rural outcomes. The evidence plan is underpinned by research and evaluation projects which are selected and prioritised based on; horizon scanning future drivers for change in rural England, the current policy context and stakeholder consultation.

We are seeking to strengthen our understanding of rural issues in line with the following Defra Business Plan policy priorities:

- Enable rural businesses to grow and innovate, with services to support thriving communities
- Hand more control to local communities and civil society, with benefits from re-connecting people and nature

---

<sup>1</sup> Further evidence activity which analyses and monitors the delivery of rural environmental goals and competitiveness in the agricultural and forestry sector is described in Defra's joint evidence plan for Sustainable Land and Soils and Sustainable and Competitive Farming Strategy. See also the evidence plan for Landscape and Outdoor Recreation.

- Improve productivity and competitiveness of food and farming businesses, with better environmental performance
- Negotiate a smaller, simpler, greener Common Agricultural Policy
- Reduce the rate of biodiversity loss in England, in line with our goal to halt overall biodiversity loss by 2020
- Improve forest management in England

We will generate, gather and publish evidence and research about the issues affecting rural people, businesses and communities (including how these issues are changing); the impact of our investments so far, and information on good practice in addressing these needs.

## 2. Current and near-term evidence objectives

**What are the current and near-term objectives for evidence and how do they align to policy outcomes?**

The overall objective of this evidence programme is to provide an underpinning multi-disciplinary evidence base on which to build effective, proportionate and realistic policy interventions to ensure rural people, businesses and communities get a fair deal, improve productivity and protect and enhance our environment. A key component that underpins the rural evidence base is how rural and urban areas are defined spatially. We will continue to work closely with the Welsh Government, Communities and Local Government and the Office for National Statistics to ensure rural and urban definitions are updated and available.

A high priority for this evidence plan relates to what evidence is required to better understand how and what policy interventions can enable rural businesses to grow and innovate, with services to support thriving communities.

### Rural economic growth, connectivity and renewable energy

The high priorities for this evidence programme will include monitoring and evaluating the implementation of current policies relating to the Rural Development Programme for England and the Rural Economy Growth Review, such as; Rural Growth Networks, Rural Community Broadband Fund, Rural Community Renewable Energy Fund, and other measures relating, for example, to rural tourism and change of use of agricultural buildings.

We will update and improve the evidence base on the enablers of rural business growth and innovation, this will include specific work with; Broadband Delivery UK to value the benefits of providing mobile coverage in mobile not spot areas, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to assess national employer skills and Government business support programmes in rural areas, the Technology Strategy Board's Small

Business Research Initiative (SBRI) to explore a project to establish more innovative ways in which the perceived visual intrusion of polytunnels can be reduced to enable more viable solutions for the crops and horticulture sector.

### Rural Communities

Improving the evidence base on how services should be designed and delivered to support thriving communities is fundamental for us to inform future policy development. In the immediate future we will investigate what the impact of an ageing population will be on service design and delivery in rural areas and also assess alternative service delivery models in rural areas. Further work on demographic change, services and transport is being considered.

The policy priority to hand more control to local communities and civil society, with benefits from re-connecting people and nature, requires us to understand what the impact of these policies means for rural people, businesses and communities. Specific monitoring of community rights initiatives relating to the Localism Act, elements of local government finance, new approaches to service delivery and neighbourhood planning in rural areas will be required to ensure that clear insight is obtained to inform our wider Departmental co-ordination role in respect of housing, planning and transport.

### Rural Development Programme

We need to ensure that we understand the impact of our investment through the current 2007-2013 Rural Development Programme in England, and prepare, and then evaluate, the impact of the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme. To do this, we will be updating our evidence relating to understanding the value for money, impact and delivery of socio-economic interventions and the LEADER<sup>2</sup> approach through the current RDPE. This is alongside other evidence activity looking at our investment (through RDPE funding) in environmental land management described in the Joint Evidence Plan for Sustainable Land and Soils (SLS) and Sustainable and Competitive Farming Strategy (SCFS).

This activity, and an ex-ante evaluation of the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme, are mandatory for this programme and will help us to understand the effectiveness of past investment and target delivery to need based on sound evidence. The ex-ante evaluation will provide an independent assessment of our programme strategy for the 2014-20 RDPE and the rationale for intervention in different areas and cover all business plan priorities set out in section 1. It will provide recommendations on where our evidence base needs to be strengthened, as well as recommendations on our plans for monitoring and evaluation.

A key additional priority for the RDP will be to undertake further research to establish how loans and financial instruments can stimulate growth and support competitiveness in sectors.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Leader approach - it is a integrated "bottom up", community led delivery methodology used to deliver some RDPE funding

Underpinning all of the above policy priority activity is the management and development of a rural evidence base consisting of in-house specialist monitoring/analysis work and a prioritised programme of commissioned research and intelligence capture.

The rural evidence base comprises:

1. Baseline evidence - primarily led by Defra's rural statistics team who have provided monitoring and analysis of publicly available data along with data purchased from public or private sources to provide rural economic and social monitoring reports, including our Rural Economic Bulletin and the Statistical Digest of Rural England. A range of statistical releases are available online at: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/rural/>
2. Commissioned research - a large volume of rural research has been commissioned over several years, much of it on social issues but including economic and spatial issues. A summary of this research, including current projects, is available through the Rural Affairs pages of the Science and Research Project database at: <http://randd.defra.gov.uk/>
3. Third Party intelligence sources - the evidence programme has access to a range of locally focused intelligence, case studies and research across all of rural England via the Rural and Farming Networks and the Rural Communities Action Network (RCAN). The RCAN is managed by Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) who are part funded by Defra, it is anticipated that at mid-term stage we will evaluate our investment in ACRE to better understand the value for money, impact and process of delivering against this investment.

### 3. Future evidence needs

#### **What are the longer-term evidence needs for the policy area/ programme?**

As new policies continue to develop in response to the Business Plan, future evidence needs will be driven and prioritised by Defra's Business Plan, the Rural Statement and the development and delivery of the Rural Development Programme, as well as evidence and stakeholder engagement. We expect it to focus on the following:

#### Rural economic growth

1. A well evidenced understanding of what are the enablers to achieve sustainable growth of rural businesses. This includes ongoing evaluation of various Rural Economy Growth Review measures, such as Rural Growth Networks, Rural Community Broadband Fund and tourism relating measures, which will report findings on initial impacts for the period of this plan.

#### Rural Development Programme

2. An ex post evaluation of the full current RDPE programme following its completion in 2014/15, in line with regulatory requirements for Rural Development programmes (this will cover all the business plan priorities mentioned above).
3. Implementation of an Evaluation Plan to assess the initial impacts of the 2014-20 Rural Development programme and identify areas for improvement, in line with regulatory requirements for Rural Development programmes. This will include reporting evaluation findings to the Commission through two enhanced Annual Implementation Reports in 2017 and 2019, and would include specific activity focussing on evidence of the impact of schemes designed to: stimulate rural growth and thriving communities, support community led local development, and increase the competitiveness and productivity of the food and farming sectors. This will also include evaluation of the impact of protecting and enhancing the environment delivered under the joint Evidence Plan for the Sustainable Land and Soils and Sustainable and Competitive Farming Strategy programmes.
4. Further evaluation of activity relating to the provision of skills and advice, the evidence for intervention in rural areas and in particular sectors (farming, food and forestry); analysis of the administrative burden for CAP beneficiaries and costs of implementation for Defra and its Delivery bodies.

#### Connectivity

5. A better understanding of the impact and value for money of investment in next generation broadband and mobile service provision and utilisation of this evidence to inform roll out decisions relating to new Information Communication Technologies beyond 4G and next generation broadband. This includes evaluation of the Rural Community Broadband Fund, currently funded by RDPE.
6. Further research will be required into how rural communities could be utilising technological advances in transport and innovative delivery models to improve connectivity for accessing services.

#### Renewable energy

7. Develop and implement a monitoring and evaluation plan for implementation of the Rural Community Renewable Energy Fund. This will inform future policy on the growth potential and barriers of/to community renewable energy projects in rural areas.

#### Rural Communities

8. Analysis of the impact of new community rights under Localism Act.
9. Development of analytical measures to assess outcomes in respect of whether communities are thriving (this could be through secondary analysis of data relating to life satisfaction and wellbeing measures that are now available at fine levels of geography through the Measuring National Wellbeing Programme led by the Office for National Statistics. These new data will be explored to produce analysis of wellbeing in rural areas)



and how service design and delivery is changing to support these communities adequately (including accounting for the needs of an ageing population).

10. Further studies will be undertaken to improve our understanding of outcomes relating to various rural typologies including; uplands, sparse/peripheral rural areas, market towns, coastal communities, coalfield areas. Where relevant, we will theme our analysis of outcomes to account for rural deprivation and hard to reach groups.

11. Further research into unaffordable rural housing, the impact of changes to the national planning framework, rising energy prices and competing demands on rural land use.

Future needs will encompass the current range of disciplines, we still envisage that our evidence activities will continue to be delivered in the following ways:

**Baseline monitoring and analysis work:** To maintain the compilation of a range of statistical reporting and other in-house analysis that is widely used to meet various policy information needs such as briefings, submissions and reporting on emerging issues.

**Targeted research into rural issues:** This work will be required to investigate rural issues beyond the evidence available from existing data sources. Research projects will continue to inform and support policy development in new emerging priority themes, and will be closely supported by multi-disciplinary specialist advice (i.e. input from Statistics, Social Research, Economists and Operational Research staff from both RCPU and RDPE teams)

**Monitoring & evaluation:** This area of our work is key to understanding the impact and outcome of Government policy in rural areas and remains a high priority for this evidence programme. Specifically, it is of great importance that we assess the value for money (including non monetised benefits) of various Rural Development schemes to assist with efficient targeting of schemes and building the foundations for a system that will inform future business cases more effectively.

## 4. Meeting evidence needs

### **What approach(es) will be taken to meeting evidence needs?**

Evidence needs are identified through:

- Close working with our policy teams and other Government Departments (such as the Department for Communities and Local Government, Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills) to regularly assess and advise on evidence requirements for immediate and longer term policy needs - this assessment is usually undertaken with the multi-disciplinary evidence team.
- Ongoing monitoring/analysis of social, economic and environmental outcomes for rural areas. A key source for this information is currently the Statistical Digest of Rural England, which is updated on a regular basis by a statistics team based in the

Department. It is an Official Statistics publication compiled and published in accordance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

- Regular engagement with rural communities and their stakeholders (rural and sector membership bodies, academic institutions, research networks and organisations, research councils, voluntary and community sector), and delivery bodies and their customers / beneficiaries in order to horizon scan the future drivers for change in rural England and prioritise what should be researched further to inform future policy development (based on a PESTLE<sup>3</sup> analysis approach). It should be noted that this evidence plan has been informed by an evidence stakeholder consultation event held in the spring of 2012. Evidence needs for the Rural Development programme are informed by discussions at the external RDPE Programme Monitoring Committee and working group on the new Rural Development Programme.

Evidence priorities are determined by a process of assessing and rating against; ministerial priorities, regulatory requirements, the policy need, horizon scanning future drivers for change, stakeholder consultation, and a consideration that the appropriate methodology is employed.

Methodological approach to answering research questions is determined through:

- Having access to a multi-disciplinary team incorporating: policy leads, statisticians, economists, social researchers, natural scientists, operational researchers and geographical information specialists – through close engagement with these specialists, through project steering groups, we are able to assess and reach a consensus about the best methodological approach to undertake to answer the research question and whether we are resourced to undertake the work. Examples of the kinds of work that may be undertaken include: initial literature reviews, spatial and statistical analysis, rapid evidence assessments or specialist commissions in the field. External expertise is utilised through including relevant stakeholders on project advisory and steering groups.
- Making good use of and building on our existing evidence, including using the wide variety of geographical data available across Government to develop a rural perspective.
- It is a mandatory regulatory requirement of EU Rural Development Programmes for evaluation activity to be undertaken as an external process and independent of delivery, where this is the case external research is commissioned.

What are the gaps in specialist expertise/capacity?

Given the wealth of administrative information held by delivery programmes such as the RDPE it is clear that greater research capacity is required to better collate and utilise this potentially rich source of information, benchmark targets and develop alternative

---

<sup>3</sup> PESTLE analysis takes account of the Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental and is used to provide a context for an organisations role in relation to the external environment.

methodologies for data collation, this work will be the focus of the RDP evidence programme team.

For peer review purposes, beyond the disciplines already available in the evidence team, we will continue to draw on wider natural scientist expertise from within Rural Development Sustainable Communities and Crops Directorate.

## 5. Evaluating value for money and impact

### **What approach(es) will be taken to maximise and evaluate value for money and impact from evidence?**

Our approach to policy evaluation has been covered throughout this evidence plan this section therefore focuses on how we will evaluate value for money and impact from our evidence.

In 2011 we published an independent review by SQW on our approach to developing and using rural evidence. The results are available via our online research database (<http://randd.defra.gov.uk/>). It is usual practice to undertake these reviews approximately every four to five years. We will therefore look to commission a follow up review, which will consider the impact, value for money and delivery of the programme by 2014/15.

An outcome of the previous review of rural evidence has pointed us towards a requirement to improve our dissemination of evidence outputs not just directly to policy customers but also to relevant stakeholder groups to ensure maximum impact of investment in evidence. With this in mind, we now always develop a communications and dissemination plan for each research output, run events to raise awareness of the outputs and regularly appraise new innovative ways of reaching new and interested audiences through, for example, social media. With this brings the challenge of distilling down often lengthy research reports into concise yet clear messages as is required by these channels of communication, the benefit being that those who still want the detailed reports can access them but those who want a brief précis of the facts can also access them.

A further outcome of the previous review suggested that greater collaboration with other research commissioners would be a way of ensuring that the rural perspective is well embedded in wider research programmes. To ensure value for money in our research, where relevant, we will work collaboratively with devolved administrations (e.g. Welsh Government), other Government Departments/Agencies (e.g. BIS and BDUK) and wider stakeholder groups (e.g. Action with Communities in Rural England, Rural Services Network, Local Government Association, National Association of Local Councils) to achieve this aim.

Good practice guidelines for the gathering and use of evidence in policy making are embedded in the way of working of the specialists involved in the evidence team supporting the programme. To ensure value for money, research that is commissioned by RCPU/RDPE is competitively tendered according to Defra Evidence handbook processes.

Tenders are assessed by expert advisory panels. Our research is commissioned and managed to comply with Government Social Research Code of practice to ensure it is objective, reliable and value for money.

To ensure our evidence is of good quality and robust for the purpose intended we use regular peer review of all our project proposals, outputs of the research programme and in house research processes. This ensures an independent perspective and help to deliver against our objectives.