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Defra Classification of Local Authority Districts and Unitary Authorities in England

An Introductory Guide

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Defra Foreword

This document introduces Defra's recommended method for classifying the level of rurality within Local Authority Districts and Unitary Authorities in England and indicates an approach that can be used at other geographical levels.

The classification complements the Rural and Urban Area Definition which provides a categorisation system from output area level up to ward level and is available from the Office for National Statistics website (<http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/geography/products/area-classifications/rural-urban-definition-and-la-classification/index.html>).

However, these two approaches adopt different methodologies designed to reflect the numerical significance of settlement size in different administrative area frameworks. For this reason the classification should not be regarded as a *definition* of the level of rurality within Local Authority Districts. This term is reserved for the level of rurality at smaller geographic scales.

The classification proposed here is seen as a tool for the purposes of presenting and analysing data that are only available at Local Authority District level on a comprehensive national basis. We do not recommend that the classification is used to inform detailed policy design (e.g. for targeting local service delivery).

Introduction

NB from April 2009 changes have been made to the LA Classification. More detail can be found at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/files/la-class-updated-technical.pdf>.

1. This Introductory Guide provides an overview of Defra's Rural and Urban Area classification of Local Authority Districts and Unitary Authorities¹ within England. A detailed description of the methodology can be obtained from the 'Defra Classification of Local Authority Districts and Unitary Authorities – a technical guide' which is available via the Defra website (<http://www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/files/la-class-orig-technical.pdf>). A dataset containing a detailed breakdown of the information used to produce the classification is also available from the Defra website.
2. The need for a new classification emerged when the Minister of State for Rural Affairs asked the Rural Evidence Research Centre to explore how a classification of English Unitary Authorities and Local Authority Districts might be constructed using data from the new definition of rural areas.
3. The methodology developed for the definition provided a binary categorisation of rural and urban areas. This was not deemed appropriate for Local Authority Districts and Unitary Authorities, as their boundaries tend to include a mix of rural and urban areas. This called for a different approach to classification.
4. The aim of the classification is to identify different levels (in terms of the total rural population) and types (in terms of the distribution of rural population in different types of settlements), of rurality and to enable the identification of districts otherwise classified as 'urban' which have significant levels of rural population.
5. The classification provides a six-fold grouping of districts (see section 11 for further details of the six classes and Annex One for a diagram of the structure of the classification):
 - 'Major Urban'
 - 'Large Urban'
 - 'Other Urban'
 - 'Significant Rural'
 - 'Rural – 50'
 - 'Rural – 80'
6. These six classes represent the 'core' or 'most purposes' level of the classification. However, the six-fold grouping can be aggregated or disaggregated further. The six classes can be aggregated to three classes;

¹ In this note the term 'district' refers to both Local Authority Districts and Unitary Authorities.

'Predominantly Urban' (Major, Large and Other Urban), 'Significant Rural' and 'Predominantly Rural' (Rural-50 and Rural-80).

7. Additionally, each class within the six-fold grouping can also be subdivided into two, based upon whether they contain a significant amount of rural population (in the case of the 'Major', 'Large' and 'Other Urban' groups), or a particular type of rurality in terms of numbers of people in smaller rural settlements (in the case of 'Significant Rural', 'Rural 50' and 'Rural 80').

How the Classification was created

8. The classification of districts is based upon three main principles:

- **The main purpose of the classification**

The classification is designed for reporting and analysing data that are not available at a more disaggregated level. The classification is not intended for detailed targeting of policy or service delivery.

- **The pattern of settlement within England**

The classification is viewed within the framework of the settlement hierarchy of England as a whole and identified as three main types of settlement:

1. a set of 'major' and 'large' urban areas distinguished by having a population size of more than 750,000 people and between 250,000 and 750,000 people respectively.
2. a set of districts that have the majority of their populations living in rural settlements (over 50%) and hence considered to be 'predominantly rural'.
3. a set of districts where the population includes a mix of urban and rural that can be further differentiated according to whether they have a 'significant' amount of rural population. These are referred to as 'other' urban and 'mixed urban/rural' districts.

Please refer to paragraph 12 for further detail about this breakdown.

- **The numerical criteria used to identify groups of districts**

These consist of both *absolute* numbers and *percentages* in order to give recognition to districts with a large urban population *and* a significant rural population in absolute or relative terms.

The Larger Market Towns

9. In the Urban and Rural Definition, all towns with more than 10,000 population are deemed to be 'urban' and their populations are not included in the rural domain – a threshold that has been in place since 1981. However, the classification aims to identify market towns which significantly contribute services to the surrounding rural locality. Therefore, certain urban areas with between 10,000 and 30,000 population are held to be 'larger market towns' and are taken into account in assessing the rurality of a district².

² The term 'larger market town' derives from the fact that market towns were identified in the Rural White Paper of 2000 as towns with between 2,000 and 20,000 population. It also distinguishes them from the term 'rural towns' used in the Urban and Rural Definition.

10. Such towns are identified by the functions they provide for the wider rural hinterland and the presence of a prescribed set of services and commercial attributes, for example, the number of shops in an area (a larger market town should have a minimum of three shops) and the proportion of addresses which are for commercial use (at least 3.5 percent). Further details of the assessment of larger market towns and a full breakdown of the assessment criteria is available in annex three of the 'Defra Classification of Local Authority Districts and Unitary Authorities – A Technical Guide'.
11. Within the classification, the populations of 207 'larger rural towns' are considered as contributing to the rural population of the districts in which they are located.

The Classification Process

12. The basic classification process consists of four steps taken in the following order:

Step 1 – Identify the 'Predominantly Rural' districts

These are districts which have a predominantly rural population and have over 50 percent of their population living in settlements classified as 'rural' under the new urban/rural definition (including the population of the larger market towns)³

Step 2- Identify the 'Major' and 'Large' Urban districts

These are districts which are entirely within or which contain a significant amount of their population in one of the six 'major' urban areas of England (i.e. with over 750,000 population), or one of the 17 'large' urban areas (i.e. with a population between 250,000 and 750,000).

Step 3 - Identify the *remaining* districts

These districts fall into neither of the above categories but can, importantly, be further divided according to whether they are 'entirely/mostly urban' or contain a significant rural population.

13. Following this initial stage in the classification process, districts can be divided into six classes, according to the proportion of their population living in rural areas (defined as Rural 80 and Rural 50), or the amount/percentage of the population living in the Major or Large urban areas. The districts identified in Step 3 are divided according to whether they have more or less than the national average (in absolute or proportional terms) of rural population. For more information about these groups see section 15.

³ Note: this group is subsequently further divided by identifying those districts with more than 80 percent of their population in rural settlements.

14. Finally, in order to understand the nature of rurality within districts, a further level of categorisation has been developed which breaks the 'core' classification down further into 12 smaller groups (see Annex 1) . #

The Classification Criteria

15. The process outlined above identifies six classes of districts which may be regarded as the main working classification of districts according to settlement type. The criteria for identifying each of these classes are as follows:

Major Urban: districts with either 100,000 people *or* 50 percent of their population in an urban area with a population of more than 750,000; there are 76 districts in this group,

Large Urban: districts with either 50,000 people *or* 50 percent of their population in one of 17 urban areas with a population between 250,000 and 750,000; there are 45 districts in this group,

Other Urban: districts with fewer than 37,000⁴ people *or* less than 26 percent⁵ of their population in rural settlements and larger market towns; there are 55 districts in this group

Significant Rural: districts with more than 37,000 people *and* more than 26 percent of their population in rural settlements and larger market towns; there are 53 districts in this group

Rural-50: districts with at least 50 percent but less than 80 percent of their population in rural settlements and larger market towns; there are 52 districts in this group, and

Rural-80: districts with at least 80 percent of their population in rural settlements and larger market towns; there are 73 districts in this group.

16. The overall structure of the six-fold classification is shown in annex one, the geographical presentation of the classification is shown in Annex 2.

⁴ The national average of the number of people in rural settlements within districts.

⁵ The national (weighted) percentage of people in rural settlements within districts.

How to use the Classification

17. The classification has been designed to aid statistical analysis and to provide a framework for reporting statistical information at the Local Authority level.
18. A spreadsheet containing the classifications by region is available on the Defra website.

For post-2009 boundaries, see: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/files/la-class-dataset-post0409.xls>.

For pre-2009 boundaries, see:
<http://www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/files/la-class-dataset-pre0409-boundaries.xls>.

19. The six-fold classification of districts identified here should not be regarded or styled as a *definition* of 'rurality' at the local authority level. The term 'rural definition' should be reserved for the classification of Census Output Areas and wards from which the district classification is derived. Effective application of a district level *classification* requires recognition of its role as a means of indicating the amount and structure of rural settlement within *all* types of district it covers, and which may be relevant to the delivery of a range of local authority services or the analysis of various kinds of data.

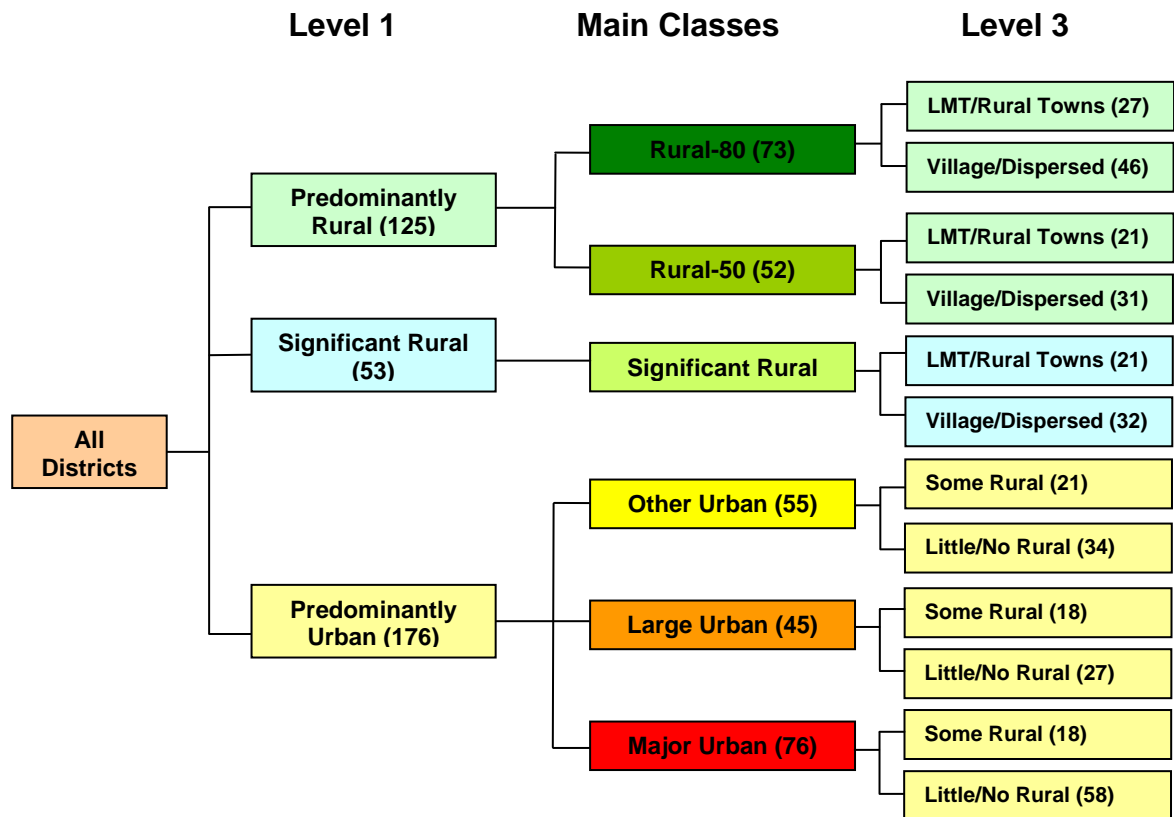
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Annex 1: The Structure of the Proposed Classification



Annex 2: The Geography of the LA Classification

