

The East of England Rural Forum – August 2007

Position Paper on Rural Learning & Skills

1. Issue

Within the East of England whilst average skills attainment figures for rural areas are broadly similar to urban areas, the average masks a **significant under-performance in peripheral, more remote & coastal areas** which is creating long term economic & social problems for these areas.

2. Recommendation

Government works with the regions to address the problems rural areas face in accessing skills provision, & thus achieve a greater impact for government investment in these areas.

The areas in which the government can help regions deliver more effective learning and skills interventions in rural areas lie in three main areas:

Policy and planning of educational provision:

- 2.1. Recognise the rapid changes taking place in rural employment patterns when planning future skills & education funding & provision;
- 2.2. Consider introducing Rural Targets within the implementation plans for Leitch during the process of producing PSA targets for the CSR 2007;
- 2.3. Recognise within funding methodologies the extra costs faced by providers in sparsely populated areas. This should include investigating if the sparsity factor we understand is applied to funding in Wales has helped provision in rural areas, and the lessons we can learn from this.

Implementation, by providing extra support for:

- 2.4. Adult & Continuing Education to help the whole rural community respond to the rapid changes in employment opportunities;
- 2.5. 'Bite sized' courses to help smaller employers & individuals access more flexible provision which more closely meets their needs;
- 2.6. Accessibility & rural outreach projects with specific funding to close the gap in educational attainment in areas where provision is weak.

Business and community engagement, by:

- 2.7. Creating enhanced incentives for SMEs to invest in skills provision & promote collaborative employer based provision.

3. Timing

This paper is presented as a background paper for the meeting on the 6th September 2007 between the Minister, Jonathan Shaw, and the chairs of the Regional Rural Forums.

4. Background

4.1. Regional Socio-Economic Geography

Issue: the economic and employment patterns of rural areas are changing fast, and whilst the total rural population is rising, rural areas are losing many young people to urban areas in search of education, employment and services.

- The East of England Rural Forum recognises the rapid changes taking place in rural employment patterns & the need for new skills if we are to create a more dynamic, inclusive & modern rural economy. For example in the Fens: Retail, Distribution and Logistics have now overtaken the agriculture and food sector as the major employer, and the fastest growing business sector is business services (Census 2001).
- Whilst figures point to an ongoing rise in the rural population (now running at circa 70,000 per annum, CRC), the recent State of the Countryside Report in July 2007 reported that rural areas are now home to 400,000 fewer young people aged 15-29 than 20 years ago.
- The increased population is being driven by two main factors:
 - The desire amongst many successful urban workers to live in the 'rural idyll' whilst continuing to work in urban areas;
 - The arrival of migrants (up by 200% in the last 3 years, State of the Countryside 2007) to occupy hard to fill jobs.
- Parts of the rural economy & community are, however, being held back by significant under-achievement in relation to workforce skills.
- Particularly in sparsely populated, remoter rural & coastal areas poor participation & achievement rates are limiting the population's life choices, restricting the skills available to employers & locking some areas into a low skills equilibrium.
- Unless these issues are addressed we will condemn these areas to continue to under-perform & the population within them will fail to fulfil their potential, with consequences for the achievement of wider socio-economic goals.

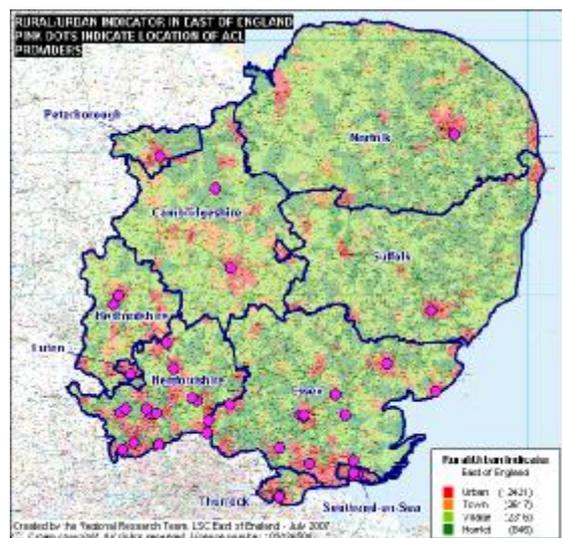
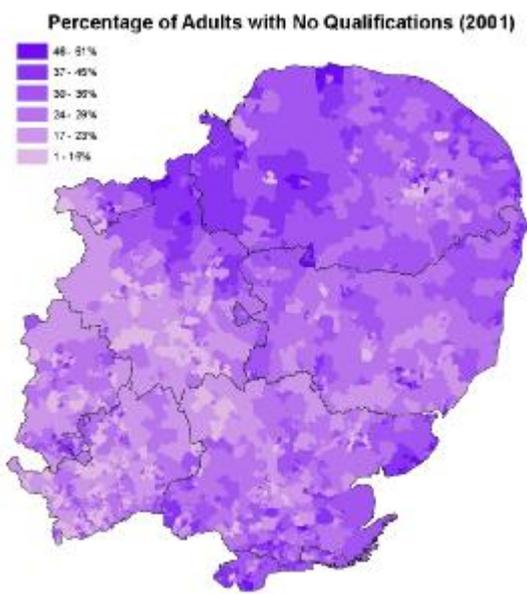
4.2. Participation and Attainment

Issue: rural areas contain wards with some of the lowest participation & attainment rates in education, particularly amongst the adult workforce in sparsely populated areas.

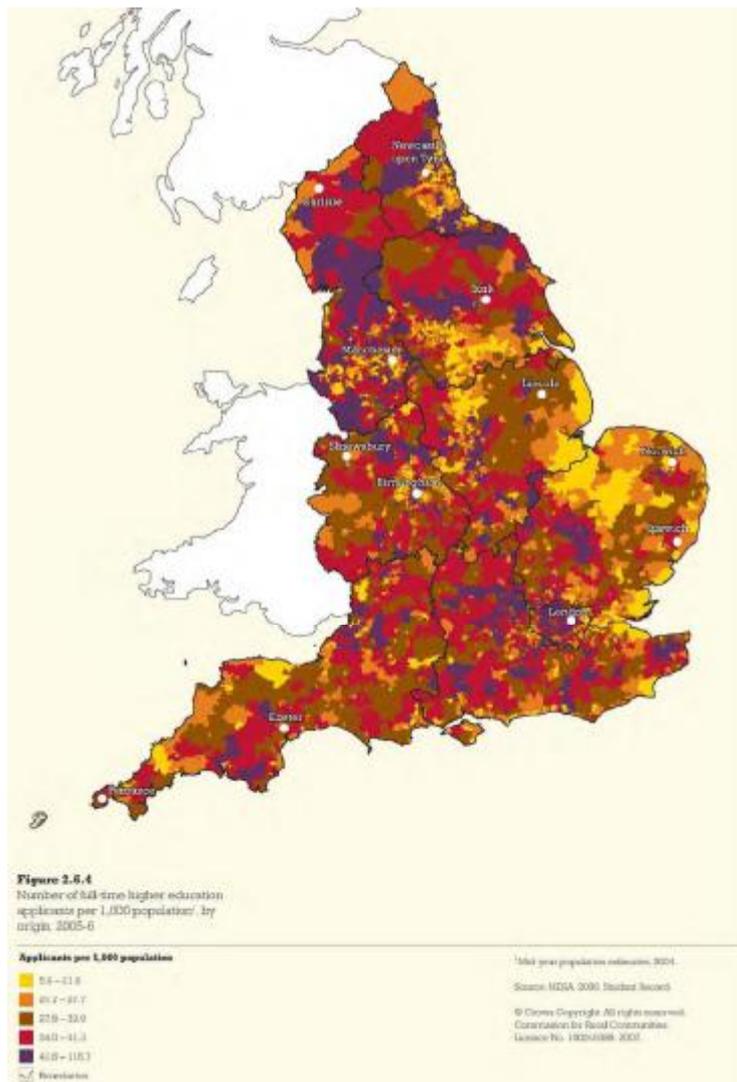
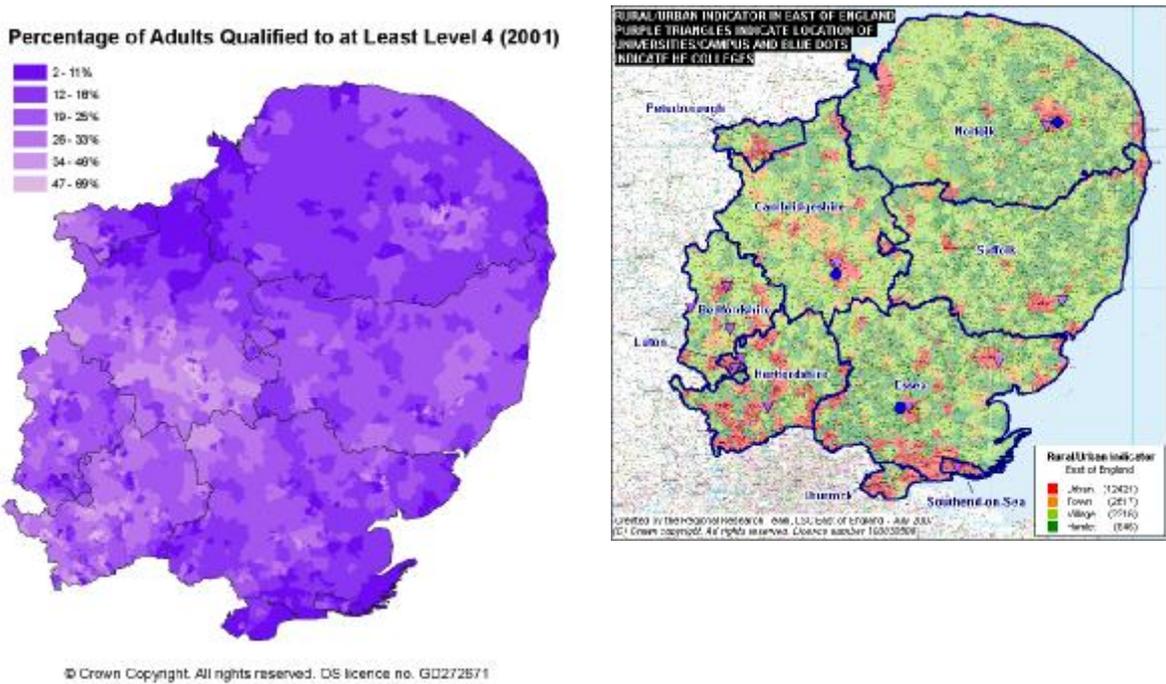
- Whilst accessible & less sparse areas (i.e. close to major towns) tend to outperform the regional average, this is largely due to their easy access. They are thus:
 - attractive as residential locations for higher income urban workers most of whom will themselves have benefited from post compulsory education;
 - and allow their inhabitants to access learning provision in their neighbouring urban area.
- In contrast, coastal and more remote rural areas (sparsely populated) are characterised by locally focused employment, low accessibility & choice of provision post 16 (& particularly post 18) & lower family & peer group educational aspirations.

- Remote areas also contain a predominance of micro and small businesses, which have problems in accessing mainstream provision such as Train to Gain and Apprenticeships due to their need for more targeted & flexible provision. Micros in particular need a range of skills in one employee which does not fit the L2 focused Train to Gain model.
- This can create a low skills equilibrium in which the lack of highly skilled workers restricts the businesses based in these areas, thus reinforcing the cycle of low skill low paid jobs.
- As a result these remoter rural areas continue to have:
 - The highest % of adults with no qualifications - 35.1% (East of England, EESCP 2007) compared to urban areas at 27.8%.
 - The lowest % of adults with at least a Level 2 qualification;
 - The lowest % of adults with higher level qualifications.
- Performance is particularly poor in small urban centres in sparsely populated rural areas (State of the Countryside 2007), which whilst they provide employment, lack the breadth of educational provision found in larger urban centres.
- Adult workforce qualification rates are also affected by the fact that many of the most qualified young people leave rural areas in their late teens & early 20s, leaving the resident population with the lowest skills performance of any in the East of England.
- Recent work on mapping adult workforce skills in the East of England (EESCP 2007), has shown that peripheral and remoter rural areas show poor levels of workforce skills particular at both ends of the learning hierarchy spectrum (i.e. basic skills and Level 4 and above).
- At both ends of the spectrum there also appears to be a correlation between the provision of learning centres and attainment:

Maps of % of Adults with no qualifications and main providers of Adult and Community Learning – note the clear correlation between attainment and the density of providers



Maps of % of adults qualified to Level 4 and main HE centres in the East of England – note the correlation between density and choice of provision and attainment



- Participation rates for Higher Education are affected severely by this divide between the more accessible and remoter rural areas (as can be seen from the map, State of the Countryside/ HESA). Areas which are remote from centres of population (and thus HE provision) score particularly badly in terms of HE recruitment, in many cases at rates less than half the rate found in major urban areas.
- It can be concluded, due to the fact that attainment at school leaving age is no worse in these areas than for urban areas, that the lack of local provision makes a significant contribution to progression rates.
- It appears that young people are less likely to progress (no option to live at home and study as increasing numbers of urban youngsters now do) **and** adult recruitment to HE is limited in these areas due to the lack of local provision.

5. Provision

- 5.1. The Forum recognises the enthusiasm & excellent work which those engaged in the provision of rural education & training bring to this area.
- 5.2. Recent work in the East of England (sample maps above) has mapped School V1th form, FE, HE, Work Based Learning & Adult & Community Education provision. In all cases the average distance to, and the range of provision, varies substantially across the region. Sparsely populated areas having significantly less choice and longer average distances to provision.
- 5.3. The lack of choice and distance to provision are both significant barriers to participation rates compared to those living in urban areas.
- 5.4. In several regions pressure on LA budgets are also focusing attention on the costs of transport for post 16 students. Cuts in these areas would impact disproportionately on the most remote and peripheral areas.
- 5.5. There is a large degree of correlation between rural areas where provision is poor & those where participation and attainment is low. All the mapping work shows significant underperformance in coastal & sparse rural areas.

6. Current Issues

6.1. Leitch

- The Leitch report has set some challenging targets for skills attainment by 2020 to enable the UK to compete globally. Whilst some urban areas have already achieved levels close to or above that envisaged for 2020, many remoter rural areas are far from meeting the targets, e.g.:
 - 40% target for Adults qualified to Level 4: whilst Cambridge has already achieved 48%, Breckland is currently only at 16%;
 - 90% target for Adults qualified to Level 2: South Cambridgeshire is currently at 75% whereas Kings Lynn & West Norfolk is only on 52%.
- Breaking this cycle of low attainment requires the public & private sector to focus on improving the accessibility & uptake of skills in rural areas.

6.2. Adults

- In recent years much of the attention within skills policy has been directed at increasing post 16 participation rates amongst young people, and whilst understandable this is not the whole solution in rural areas. In sparsely populated areas age 17 participation is not a comparative problem, it is what happens after this within the adult workforce that causes significant issues for the employment base and the economy.
- Over 2/3rds of the rural workforce of 2020 is already at work, & thus unless action is taken to address the skill needs of the current workforce it is impossible for many rural areas to achieve the Leitch targets.
- Most rural employees work in SMEs, many of which are micros. Many rural employees thus work for companies which do not have the money or policies to support their skill needs. Such businesses also lack the in house capacity to offer NVQs or apprenticeships.
- Whilst rural employment levels are high the numbers employed in manual occupations is comparatively high. As employment in the business and service sector continues to grow at the expense of manual those made redundant in rural areas often need completely new skills.

7. Next Steps

7.1. What the region(s) can do for themselves

The region is addressing many of the issues outlined in this paper, by e.g.:

- Supporting the creation of new Universities in areas which previously lacked provision (University College Suffolk);
- Undertaking an active regional research programme driven by the EESCP which is clearly highlighting the areas in which future rural investment is needed by all parts of the public and business sector;
- Using new funding flexibilities as they become available e.g. the new flexibility within LSC funding to support adult non-qualification bearing courses, which are often instrumental in attracting hard to reach adults;
- Championing new approaches such as integrated student and travel to work public transport provision, to make both more viable.

7.2. The areas in which we need support from central government

There are however, areas where regional action would be substantially assisted by central government action. These actions lie in three areas:

Policy and planning of educational provision:

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Implementation, by providing extra support for:

- Adult & Continuing Education to help the whole rural community respond to the rapid changes in employment opportunities;
- 'Bite sized' courses to help smaller employers & individuals access more flexible provision which more closely meets their needs;
- Accessibility & rural outreach projects with specific funding to close the gap in educational attainment in areas where provision is weak.

Business and community engagement, by:

- Creating enhanced incentives for SMEs (especially micros) to invest in skills provision & promote collaborative employer based provision.

7.3. The extra outcomes that can be achieved with government support

Government support would help the region close the gap in attainment which is particularly marked in peripheral & sparsely populated rural areas.

Strengthening the skills base of these areas would:

- Meet the needs of the changing employment base for new skills;
- Address the socio-economic exclusion experienced in remote rural areas, reducing their dependence on government & enhancing choices.