

Achieving sustainable rural development

Sustainable rural development is currently a hot issue in most European countries. Underpinning much of current government policy today are the twin principles of promoting sustainable communities and sustainable development, measured in terms of social, economic and environmental well-being. This provides a significant challenge to policy makers who in the past have acted to meet one of these interests, often without full consideration of the impact of their decisions on other sectors.

In 'Achieving Sustainability Development in Rural Areas: a positive response to the climate change agenda' ECORYS experts describe current UK government policy and its effects, proposing a radical rethinking of the way in which rural communities can continue to grow whilst becoming more environmentally sustainable. Finally, the application of a new Evaluation Checklist is tested. This checklist is meant for use by decision makers at all levels - but particularly sub-regionally - in assessing the extent to which development policies work for or against sustainable rural communities.

The research context

The project seeks to examine the UK policy landscape as it currently exists in relation to England specifically and how it is currently evolving, in order to identify the ways in which the government's objective of promoting sustainable development in all areas is being achieved in a rural context. Having analysed policies and their implementation the research team worked to develop an Evaluation Checklist designed to enable decision makers to maximise the benefits for rural areas that come from a positive response to climate change. The research to date has been designed to provide a very focused response, funded through the ECORYS Research Programme and sponsorship from the Commission for Rural Communities. The funding has enabled a thorough examination of the subject to be undertaken and for the critical outputs to be achieved. The second, anticipated, stage of the proposal is to undertake piloting or road testing in the field with a range of stakeholders in different contexts, with a view to evaluating its' practicality and refining for eventual adoption and deployment.



Research questions

The research has focused upon practical application of the sustainable communities agenda with respect to rural communities in the UK – with a specific focus upon England. The study has sought to rigorously analyse eight case study communities from across the eight English regions with rural areas (excluding London) with a view to identifying the application of a range of key factors relating to sustainable development and addressing climate change.

The research also investigates the situation in the Netherlands as a comparison case study country within the EU to identify synergies and good practice.

Our key research questions then can be summarised as follows:

- Does policy and practice in relation to rural England demonstrate 'buy in' to the concepts of sustainable development and sustainable communities?
- Is there an analysis and understanding of the full range of sustainable development, sustainable communities and climate change issues as they manifest themselves in rural areas?

- Are these issues treated as part of a single process - i.e. how can we meet social, economic and environmental needs of our rural communities in ways that tackle and respond to climate change?
- Is there recognition and response to the interdependencies that exist between rural and urban areas?

If the above is not happening, is it because:

- There is a failure to accept concepts of sustainable development and sustainable communities?
- There is failure to apply concepts of sustainable communities and sustainable development to rural areas?
- There is a failure of the evidence base?
- There is a narrowness or lack of SWOT analysis that picks up rural issues?
- There is a narrowness or weakness of linkages between strategies?

The key focus of the research study is to understand how pressure for the development of sustainable rural communities is competing currently with imperatives to address climate change and how this competition is playing out at the strategic level – in other words are strategies helping or hindering rural England in developing a sustainable future for itself?

The ECORYS research team proposes its view of what a sustainable rural community should look like in terms of the key principles which should govern their future development (a more elaborate version can be found in the research paper):



Outcome: evaluation checklist

The sustainable rural communities evaluation checklist, a key output for this research project, is designed to enable communities and decision makers to evaluate their strategic landscape and to consistently explore:

- The elements that make up a sustainable rural community.
- The elements that comprise a response to climate change.
- What is happening in terms of each individual place and element relevant to sustainability?
- Identify where tensions exist between the different elements and how they are being overcome.
- The extent to which action is being taken in an integrated approach.
- What opportunities and obstacles are affecting the ability of decision makers and rural residents to adopt an integrated approach?

An extensive checklist can be found in the research paper.

This checklist is a draft checklist. The worth of this model and its full value can only be established after extensive ‘road testing’ with a variety of partners in different regions across the country. In addition to this there is a clear need to debate and analyse the conclusions of the research in terms of the shortcomings of current UK policy in providing for the development of sustainable rural communities in a policy environment dominated by concerns relating to climate change.

Conclusion

If sustainable development and sustainable communities are to be achieved in rural areas, changes are needed to the way in which policy is developed at local, sub-regional and regional levels. To some extent the evolving regional sustainability frameworks offer a basis for this change in approach. The existing guidance on sustainability appraisals provides an appropriate process to be followed; however there are areas where it can (should) be strengthened. In this respect, the proposed evaluation checklist can be a valuable tool.

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