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Poverty and history

The curse of rural poverty goes back centuries. In a Punch cartoon from 1863, a peasant leans over a pigsty. In the background, dishevelled, thatched cottages are visible. The labourer is mousing to the pigs: ‘I’d like to be cared for half as well as they be.’ The cartoon was accompanied by an editorial comment that the ‘misera-ble condition of the English rural labourer was exciting comment – but nothing practical was being done.

The sentiment remains true for many in 2015, and continuing rural poverty is a stain on the record of all political parties. Back in 1986, Brian McNair’s Rural Deprivation Study – never published by the Government – identified that a quarter of all households in the rural survey were living in poverty, the margins of poverty. The problem of poverty is largely not exclusively concentrated among the elderly.

More recently, the Association for the Conservation of Energy reported in 2013 that ‘more rural areas have a higher incidence of fuel poverty among children than cities, towns and suburbs’. It went on to link this to dependence on costly electricity, and families in fuel poverty are more than twice as likely to be heating with fuels other than mains gas. It comes as no surprise to find that more households in rural areas are unable to have a mains supply, due to their distance to the network. In this way, rural residents with above-average needs for fuel are pushed below the poverty line so that they may have to choose between heating and eating.

Social isolation

Poverty of rural residents is mirrored in the poverty of resources – both financial and institutional – with which to address it. While the Government-wide Rural Statement 2012 did at least acknowledge that ‘poverty and deprivation exist in rural places’, the Coalition failed to finance initiatives to help local authorities and others to address deprivation. In fact, one of its first acts was to scrap the Commission for Rural Communities – whose annual ‘state of the countryside’ reports provided the comprehensive evidence needed to tackle rural poverty – as part of the ‘bureaucracy of the quangos’.

A 2015 Cabinet Office and Defra analysis sought what will rural communities look like in the future? It omits to even mention poverty or deprivation, as does the Government’s 10-point Rural Productivity Plan to ‘harness the enormous economic potential of England’s rural areas’. And it was only a hasty 2015 campaign and petition to Government, signed by more than 13,000 people, that saved the Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE), the national voice for the 38 rural community councils that provide practical assistance to communities on issues like housing and transport. Cllr Ken Browse, chair of the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), argued at the time that this vital rural network would mean ‘services will be lost and more people will become lonely and isolated’.

The Government’s response to that petition was ominous, commenting on the need to ‘lessen reliance on central Government funding’ and how ‘reducing the deficit remains a key priority’. And yet, the Rural Services Network recently calculated that funding for local authorities from central Government is £131 lower per head in rural areas than urban areas, with its letter to Prime Minister David Cameron arguing that the ‘ever-widening differences in the level of services’ between town and country threatened the ‘long-term viability of many rural communities’.

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various community rights, not least the ability for communities to generate their own Neighbourhood Plans. By September 2015, there were 1,671 areas working to produce a community-led plan, with a 2014 survey by Turley suggesting that more than two-thirds of them cover rural areas. The same survey found that areas of below-average affluence are less likely to enter into the neighbourhood planning process. Clearly, there is a real need to provide enough financial support and technical assistance to allow all rural neighbourhoods to promote targeted (and affordable) homes being phased in so as not to overwhelm local services such as GPs and schools.

As Lord Richard Best observes in his 2015 Rural Housing Policy Review, we as a society need to deal with the fact that ‘the position facing the next generation who need to live and work in rural areas has become even tougher’. Despite research by Halifax Building Society showing that average house prices are 26% higher in rural districts (compounded by 36% lower average earnings), the review highlighted a continued failure to deliver anything like the number of rural affordable homes we need – not helped by the abandonment of targets for Homes and Communities Agency investment in rural areas. In further evidence of a bias against rural areas, Lord Best points out that if affordable housing was distributed fairly, relative to population, 7,500 affordable homes should be built in rural areas each year (2,886 were delivered in 2013). The Halifax study also found that social housing makes up just 12% of rural housing stock, compared with 19% in urban areas.

Lack of affordable housing

So what is Government doing on the rural housing front? In August, Chancellor George Osborne and Environment Secretary Elizabeth Truss wrote an article bemoaning that ‘the lack of housing in rural areas is a scandal’. However, the absence of the phrase ‘affordable housing’ in their article and the Rural Productivity Plan was telling. The Housing and Planning Bill, introduced in October, duly announced measures to replace the duty on councils to provide affordable homes for rent, with a duty to build homes to buy at a 20% discount – a change which The Country Land and Business Association’s Christopher Price said could mean that those who are priced out of so-called ‘starter homes’ (which may cost as much as £250,000 in rural areas) ‘will have no accommodation options open to them’.

So what to do? Not least in the face of rural development agencies arguing that ‘the majority of deprived people do not live in highly deprived areas, and programmes targeted at these areas will not reach substantial numbers of deprived people’. This again highlights how deprivation is hidden or masked amid rural prosperity (or the perception thereof), and official indicators that fail to recognise poverty in the countryside. A classic miscalculation relates to car ownership as a measure of affluence – in rural communities vehicle ownership is relatively high, creating the impression that they must be doing alright, whereas of course it’s more to do with convenience, flexibility and necessity as a result of poor and declining public transport. At the local level, principal district and county authorities need to make localism real by delegating powers, resources and offering technical help so that communities and their parish and town councils can, in turn, sponsor practical initiatives to address rural poverty.

Poverty of ideas

In a similar vein, parish and town councils must use their tax-raising powers to finance ventures of community benefit, such as multi-play areas and village halls. And while the Localism Act 2011 extended community rights to bid to adopt principal authority services and protect local assets, communities and their councillors must make things happen that don’t require legislation – bids and applications – as well as support initiatives such as community-supported agriculture and regeneration projects, from skate parks to allotments and herb gardens, that can flourish through DIY and help-in-kind.

As Malcolm Moseley, then-director of ACRE, wrote way back in 1992: ‘Refer to “social problems” and the politicians and public have a mental image of the inner city. Refer to “rural problems” and the image is one of conservation, agriculture and the environment.’ In 2015, we not only find the rural poor are still with us, but that we have a poverty of ideas as to how to revitalise our villages and towns. This has to change.