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rural proofing — an elusive concept?

Peter Jones examines rural proofing initiatives in England and elsewhere and reflects on the rural proofing process



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In summarising its Levelling Up White Paper, the government argued that ‘for levelling up to mean something to people in their daily lives, we need to reach into every community in the country, from city centres to rural areas, in order to start to rebuild social capital and self-reliance in our most abandoned neighbourhoods.’¹ That said, the White Paper’s illustrations of the geographical inequalities within the UK seem to have a strong urban focus—for example, ‘urban areas and coastal towns suffer disproportionately from crime, while places with particularly high levels of deprivation, such as former mining communities, outlying urban estates and seaside towns, have the highest levels of community need and poor opportunities for the people who grow up there’, and ‘many of the worst areas of deprivation are found in the UK’s most successful cities’.¹

The White Paper’s apparent focus on towns and cities led the Rural Services Network to argue that ‘most proposals for targeted interventions appear to be major town or city focused with rural areas, people, communities and businesses overlooked’.² Within the White Paper the government could perhaps be seen to be looking to counter such arguments by signalling the future publication of *Delivering for Rural England—the Second Report on Rural Proofing*; with ‘rural proofing’ simply defined as understanding ‘the impacts of government policy

intervention and to ensure fair and equitable policy outcomes for rural areas’.³ The report itself appeared in September 2022.⁴ In his foreword, Lord Benyon, the Minister responsible for rural affairs in England, emphasised his desire to ensure that ‘rural areas—and the people living within them—are given the opportunity to flourish’. The report claims to present an evidence-based picture which helps us to understand what levelling up might look like in rural areas and provides a basis for future priorities.

With these thoughts in mind, this article looks at rural proofing initiatives in England to date and a small number of other countries, and offers some reflections on the process.

Rural proofing in England

The concept of rural proofing is not new. Over 20 years ago the *Our Countryside: The Future* White Paper,⁵ subtitled *A Fair Deal for Rural England*, argued that:

‘rural proofing means that as policy is developed and implemented policy makers should systematically:

- *Think about whether there will be any significant differential impacts in rural areas;*
- *If there are such impacts assess what these might be;*
- *Consider what adjustments/compensations might be made to fit rural circumstances.’*

Since then, successive governments have claimed to embrace rural proofing, but they have never really taken it to their hearts. In 2008 Atterton,⁶ for example, suggested that while the White Paper marked the government's 'formal commitment to rural proof all domestic policies [...] since then, progress with rural proofing has been patchy and inconsistent across Government Departments', and argued that 'in the main rural proofing is not well embedded into Departments' policy making processes and tangible outcomes from rural proofing activity have been disappointing'.

Since its initial introduction, successive governments have claimed to be incorporating it into policy-making. In 2012 the government affirmed its support for rural proofing, stating that it 'requires policy-makers to consider the rural impacts of their policies and programmes and, where necessary, to make adjustments to achieve equally effective and successful outcomes for individuals, communities and businesses in rural areas'.⁷

Three years later, the government commissioned an independent review of rural proofing, headed by Lord Cameron of Dillington. Its focus was on 'how departments use the national rural proofing guidance and to what extent rural proofing is systematically embedded within departmental policy cycles'.⁸ The review recommended, *inter alia*, that Ministers in the Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra) 'should work with Cabinet Office to strengthen and improve rural proofing guidance when the impact of policies is being assessed, to ensure that rural policy impacts are given clear and robust attention', and that 'rural proofing must be applied more systematically in Departments and described more openly and transparently'.⁸

The government responded positively to Lord Cameron's review and aimed to strengthen some of the review's recommendations—Defra reported⁹ that it would 'work with Cabinet Office and BIS [the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills] to further embed rural proofing into the formation of government policy and the impact assessment process', and that 'Departments will also need to include as part of their annual reporting process information about how their policies have been rural proofed and what changes this has resulted in', which would 'enable their actions and resulting outcomes to be fully scrutinised and monitored'.

Two years later Defra published *Rural Proofing*,³ to provide 'practical guidance to assess impacts of policies on rural areas'. This guidance identified four stages, with each stage of this rural proofing process designed to answer a set question—namely:

- 'What are the direct or indirect impacts of the policy on rural areas?'
- 'What is the scale of these impacts?'
- 'What actions can you take to tailor your policy to work better in rural areas?'

- 'What effect has your policy had on rural areas and how can it be further adapted?'

The guidance also included a 'rural proofing checklist', which covered a wide range of actions, including allowing for higher rural unit delivery costs in funding formulae or allocations, looking at alternative means for providing and accessing services in rural areas, ensuring that the needs of smaller businesses are specifically addressed, and allowing local delivery bodies the flexibility to find the best local solutions.

The House of Lords Select Committee on the Rural Economy reported in 2019¹⁰ that 'although we heard of some positive examples of rural proofing, such as in the development of the Industrial Strategy, we also heard of major and continuing problems including late timing, poor consultation, inconsistency of application and lack of transparency and accountability. There is clearly significant room for improvement in how rural proofing is carried out.' Furthermore, the Select Committee argued that 'an effective rural strategy would, we believe, help to improve the consistency and quality of rural proofing by ensuring that Government takes a more deliberate and systematic interest in rural needs and objectives across the policy spectrum. We recommend that, as part of a rural strategy, the Government comprehensively rethinks and reforms the rural proofing process across Government, and at the local level'.¹⁰

In response to recommendations made by the Select Committee, Defra introduced what Lord Gardiner of Kimble, the Minister for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity, described as 'the first cross-government rural proofing report'.¹¹ While this report drew attention to the government's commitments to strengthening the rural economy, developing rural infrastructure, delivering rural services, and managing the natural environment, it offered little or no information on the successes or failures of rural proofing.

Wider rural proofing initiatives

Rural proofing is not confined to England. The Northern Ireland Executive first made a commitment to rural proofing in 2002, and although initially it applied only to government departments it was later extended to cover district councils and other public authorities within the province. This commitment 'required government departments to identify the potential impact that a policy or strategy would have on a rural area, to make a proper assessment of those impacts if they were deemed to be significant and, where appropriate, to make adjustments to the policy or strategy to take account of rural circumstances'.¹² That said, under the terms of Northern Ireland's 2016 Rural Needs Act, the principles of rural proofing are incorporated in the Rural Needs Impact Assessment process, and the term rural proofing is no longer used.



‘Successive governments have claimed to embrace rural proofing, but they have never really taken it to their hearts’

Within the European Community, the participants in the Cork 2.0 European Conference on Rural Development emphasised that ‘the rural potential to deliver innovative, inclusive and sustainable solutions for current and future societal challenges such as economic prosperity, food security, climate change, resource management, social inclusion, and integration of migrants should be better recognised’, and that ‘a rural proofing mechanism should ensure this is reflected in Union policies and strategies’.¹⁵

At the first meeting of the European Network for Rural Development’s Thematic Group on Rural Proofing, held in January 2022, Alexia Rouby, from the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development at the European Commission, discussed the implementation of rural proofing at the European Union and subsidiary levels. More specifically, at the EU level a rural proofing mechanism would be put in place ‘to assess the anticipated impact of major EU legislative initiatives on rural areas’.¹⁴

In Finland, while interest in rural proofing has been traced back to 2007,¹⁵ it was 2021 before an inter-ministerial working group was set up to provide guidance on assessing the impact of government legislative proposals. Here, rural proofing is focused on a checklist approach, which asks the question ‘does the proposal have impacts on...?’,¹⁵ and might cover a wider range of issues, including living conditions, health, wellbeing, the environment, landscape, culture, transport, digitalisation, and the realisation of democracy. At the regional and local

levels, rural proofing involves a range of stakeholders from the public, private and voluntary sectors, whereas at the national level impact assessments are carried out by a small number of government officials. Within Finland rural proofing is voluntary, which is seen as a weakness, but it has helped to raise awareness of rural issues and to enhance place-based policy and development.

Spain’s G100 Rural Proofing open participatory project was launched in 2021, with the aims of ensuring that the aspirations and needs of rural communities are heard when policies are established and budgets set, and of promoting the potential of rural areas in providing inclusive and sustainable solutions to current and future rural challenges. An early evaluation of the project¹⁶ revealed a number of problematic issues, including a weak culture of evaluating public policies, a lack of independent evidence, a disconnection between national, regional and local policies, a regulatory maze that hampers entrepreneurship, and the fact that planning is currently very restrictive in theory and poorly enforced in practice.

The rural proofing initiatives in the relatively small number of other countries that have adopted the process can also be illustrated by way of a summary outline. In Sweden, for example, the focus of rural proofing was on creating ‘viable rural areas with equal opportunities for entrepreneurship, work, housing and welfare [...] leading to long-term sustainable development throughout the country’.¹⁷ In the Quebec province of Canada, a ‘rural lens’ rural proofing policy tool was first introduced as a

voluntary measure in 1996 to assess the impact of public policies on populations living in rural areas.¹⁸ However, the policy tool was abolished in 2013 because of what was seen as the limited success of rural proofing and the lack of political will to drive it.

Concluding reflections

Rural proofing has had a chequered history across a number of jurisdictions, and, while it continues to attract political attention, it seems an elusive concept, and it remains to be seen whether it can help in strengthening the rural economy, developing rural infrastructure, delivering rural services and managing the natural environment, as envisaged in the government's Levelling Up White Paper. More generally, a number of wider issues merit reflection, including complexity, ownership and co-ordination, financial resources, monitoring and evaluation, and sustainability.

Complexity is a major issue, begging questions both about the links between various policy areas, such as housing, access to transport and community services, support for rural businesses, and the environment—and about the viability of proofing sector-specific policies. While the rural proofing of new planning policy as it relates, for example, to housebuilding programmes might help to 'encourage development that meets local housing needs in rural areas',¹¹ any comprehensive attempt to rural proof planning policy must embrace an analysis of how new housing development in rural areas will impinge on the provision of a wide range of educational, social and community services, and on the natural environment.

'If rural proofing is to begin to deliver its ambitious goals, then robust and independent monitoring and evaluation of the rural impacts of new policies and programmes is essential'

Complexity is also involved in the challenges associated with the ownership and control of rural proofing. In his Ministerial foreword to the 2021 Defra report on rural proofing,¹¹ Lord Gardiner of Kimble claimed that it illustrated 'how rural proofing is planned and coordinated across government'. That said, the report provided little detailed evidence on how such co-ordination has been effected between government departments. At the same time, the OECD has argued that 'multi-stakeholder engagement and a 'bottom-up' approach is a key ingredient to ensure sustainability and local ownership of rural policies'.¹⁹ More

specifically, in addressing 'rural proofing' as part of the approach to 'levelling up rural Britain', the National Farmers' Union has argued that the 'rural voice must be expressed by people who are living and working in the countryside and know what the real impact will be on homes, livelihoods and services'.²⁰

Perhaps more tellingly for levelling up, the OECD¹⁹ argued that 'as globalisation deepens and the gaps between rural and other regions expand, rural regions increasingly feel that their needs are being overlooked by national policy making'. Here, at a time when many commentators have expressed concerns about the extension of central government powers within England, the extent to which central government departments will be prepared to embrace the local ownership of rural proofing must remain an open question.

Two sets of financial issues merit attention. On the one hand, a genuine commitment to rural proofing, and rural strategies, requires a dedicated and responsive funding framework. More generally, in outlining the case for a strategy for the rural economy, the House of Lords Select Committee on the Rural Economy¹⁰ suggested that 'local rural strategies would act along similar lines as City Deals in providing local authorities and LEPs [Local Enterprise Partnerships] with funding and decision-making powers to ensure that the goals set in the strategy can be achieved'. On the other hand, those authorities and bodies involved in conducting rural proofing exercises will need additional funding in order to discharge their responsibilities. Simply adding such duties to the existing responsibilities of local authorities whose financial and human resources are currently under considerable strain would, at best, lead to superficial rural proofing.

If rural proofing is to begin to deliver its ambitious goals, then robust and independent monitoring and evaluation of the rural impacts of new policies and programmes is essential. Here the goal is to improve current and future impacts in an attempt to ensure the enhancement of rural services, facilities, and environments. Ideally such exercises should take place on a regular basis while the policies and programmes are being progressively introduced, in order, for example, to assess not only how local stakeholders are included in rural proofing process, but also the nature of their impact on this process. It is also essential that funding is available to support the independent monitoring of rural proofing.

More generally, the rural proofing of policies designed to contribute to levelling up can be seen to pose challenges to sustainable development. The dominant accent of the government's approach to levelling up is on driving growth—but continuing economic growth is incompatible with sustainable development. Here the arguments focus on economic growth, dependent as it is on the depletion of the Earth's already stretched finite natural resources, being incompatible with sustainable development.

While such arguments have global force, they are also clearly manifested at the local scale, for example in the resource demands of new housing developments and new rural infrastructure, and in encouraging more tourism within rural areas.

Finally, the *Delivering for Rural England* report⁴ suggests that the National Planning Policy Framework will ensure that ‘planning policies and decisions should enable the sustainable growth and expansion of all types of business in rural areas [...] as well as the development and diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural businesses’, but the concept of rural proofing was conspicuous by its absence from the *Planning for the Future* White Paper.²¹ With this in mind, local authority planners will surely want to keep a weather eye on if, and how, rural proofing supports levelling up in rural areas. Paradoxically, many planners working in the private sector may effectively look to call on, and for, rural proofing to exploit a variety of development opportunities within those rural areas.

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Notes

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