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Derounian, James ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1738-9764 (2015) The Invisible Poor. Campaign to Protect Rural England Magazine (Winter). pp. 10-12.

Official URL: http://www.cpre.org.uk/

EPrint URI: https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/3440

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The invisible poor

Poverty in the English countryside is nothing new – but as **James Derounian** discovers, it can go undetected and unacknowledged

As you stand in the middle of the pretty Cotswold market town of Winchcombe, population 5,000 – complete with castle, heritage railway and delicatessen – it's hard to imagine it being stalked by rural poverty. And yet appearances can be deceptive, according to town councillor Tim Petchey – Winchcombe born and bred: 'There are pensioners here living alone in homes without hot running water. They just cannot afford the necessary upgrade,' he says. 'Some of the old cottages in Winchcombe look lovely on a sunny day, but are actually dark and cold places, where the damp gets into the poor buggers' bones. And it tends to be lifelong

Academic and community activist James Derounian is a national teaching fellow and principal lecturer in applied social sciences at the University of Gloucestershire.

Winchcombe residents, living in cottages dotted around town, that find themselves isolated and hidden in a sea of affluence.'

This state of affairs is true for too many communities across rural England, where general wellbeing, or the popular perception of it, smothers and conceals pockets of poverty, and discourages adequate policy responses. In Winchcombe, you can pass a house with a swimming pool within sight of housing association properties for those with little to spare. Rural affluence and poverty live cheek by jowl. A retired doctor notes that there are parts of the town where residents' health and lifespan are significantly reduced on account of rural disadvantage. In his revealing book, *Landscapes of Poverty*, journalist Michael Simmons cited evidence that 'hundreds of thousands, if not millions, who are poor live – and wait – in the countryside'.

Poverty and history

The curse of rural poverty goes back centuries, of course: in a *Punch* cartoon from 1863, a peasant leans over a pigsty. In the background, dishevelled thatched cottages are visible. The labourer is musing to the pigs: 'I'd like to be cared vor half as well as thee be'. The cartoon was accompanied by an editorial comment that the 'miserable 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 McLaughlin's *Rural Deprivation Study* – never published by the Government – identified that 'a quarter of all households in the rural survey were living in poverty/on the margins of poverty... The problem of poverty is heavily but 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 using fuels other than mains gas'. It comes as no surprise to find that more households in rural areas are unlikely 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

> The 'ever-widening differences in the level of services' between town and country threatened the 'long-term viability of many rural communities'

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 'bonfire of the quangos'.

A 2015 Cabinet Office and Defra analysis *What will rural communities look like in the future?* 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 frantic 2015 campaign and petition to Government, signed by more than 13,000 people, that saved 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 axing 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'. Indeed, the bus services that are a lifeline for the most vulnerable among these communities are bearing the brunt of the cuts, according to the Campaign for Better Transport, which found average budget reductions of 19% in rural areas in 2014-15. And there is little comfort for those struggling to heat their homes, with CPRE's *Warm and Green* report showing that the 18% of the population who live in rural areas receive less than 1p for every pound the Government invests in energy efficiency.

Hope in localism?

So is localism and DIY activism the answer to rural development generally, and anti-poverty work in particular? The Localism Act 2011 brought in

Opposite page: Many seemingly affluent rural areas, such as Winchcombe in Gloucestershire, mask local poverty
Inset, above left: As this 1863 *Punch* cartoon shows, deprivation in the countryside is nothing new
Above: Bus services, as seen here in Cumbria, are a lifeline for remote communities but have borne the brunt of cuts

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.

Above: A volunteer working in a Norfolk food bank run by The Trussell Trust

ALAMY

THE RISE OF FOOD BANKS

There has been an increase in the number of rural food banks that provide emergency provisions. The Trussell Trust, a charity working to end hunger and poverty in the UK that runs many local food banks, argues that 'rural poverty can bite hardest.'

North Cotswold Foodbank founder James Milton says: 'Higher living costs and lower earnings puts immense pressure on working people in rural communities. The majority of our clients are working families. Whether or not the national minimum wage might be sufficient for survival in towns, where amenities are within walking distance, in rural communities it certainly cannot stretch to the additional costs of essential travel and higher domestic energy costs. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2013 shows that to achieve an acceptable minimum standard of living, rural dwellers need to earn £2-£3 an hour more than urban dwellers.'

Above: Rural homes, as shown here in Suffolk, are in great demand but short supply

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

> 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'

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.

Email your views on the issue of rural poverty to cpre@thinkpublishing.co.uk