

Rural and Urban Area Classification 2004

An Introductory Guide

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Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
Office for National Statistics
Welsh Assembly Government**

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Introduction

This Introductory Guide provides guidance on the new Rural and Urban Area Classification for England and Wales. The need for a new classification was identified during earlier work that reviewed urban and rural definitions. It made clear that the current definitions had limited use as they were based on different criteria. In particular, rural definitions based on socio-economic characteristics were seen as unsuitable so this new classification adopts a settlement-based approach. This guide outlines some important features of the classification which users may wish to consider, including its limitations. It also attempts to answer some of the obvious questions users are likely to raise.

The Rural and Urban Area Classification is a product of a joint project to produce a single and consistent classification of urban and rural areas. The project was sponsored by the Countryside Agency (CA), the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), Office for National Statistics (ONS), the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) and the Welsh Assembly Government. A consortium consisting of South East Regional Research Laboratory (SERRL) at Birkbeck College and the Department of Town and Regional Planning at University of Sheffield carried out the work.

The advice provided in the introductory guide is based on discussion amongst the five project sponsors, and also on feedback from an online validation exercise held in Spring 2004, to which approximately 100 people responded.

How to use the Rural and Urban Area Classification

The classification is designed to be a statistical tool. Its purpose is to provide a framework for analysis and reporting of statistical information.

The classification can be used to analyse and report on a very wide range of data sets that can be geographically referenced. These data sets will include a wide range of demographic, social and economic variables. A key feature of the classification is its flexibility. The different settlement type and context categories allow for a rich and diverse description of rural areas and analysis of rural issues.

A key practical use of the classification will be to examine if a particular socio-economic indicator had markedly different values in different types of urban and rural area. For example we could look at the question of how economic inactivity rates in villages compare to the national average. This helps us to assess whether various policy initiatives impact differently across the various settlement types and contexts.

An important feature of the classification is that it can be used with a very wide range of data sources without the need for data collectors to change these sources. The classification can be used with *any* data source that can produce results at the Output Area (produced for publication of Census 2001) or ward level. If a data source is based on unit postcodes or map references then it can be linked with the classification through a simple look-up table and a breakdown by type of urban/rural area produced for various geographical areas (England and Wales, regions etc), subject to the limitations of the sample size/design.

Since the classification will be widely applicable across datasets it will allow users to pull together data from different departments and help in the analysis of data in complex policy areas.

Output Areas are intended to form the fundamental building block geography for all National Statistics. The use of Output Areas as the geographic base will provide a rich source of data and will provide stability to allow comparison over time. The provision of a classification of Output Areas will enable these data to be used for rural analyses.

To support such analysis look up tables between Output Areas and a range of other geographies will be available via the National Statistics website.

How not to use the Urban and Rural Area Classification

The classification does not attempt to provide all the answers to urban and rural issues. As with all statistical tools there are some things that it does well. There are also some uses for which it is less appropriate. The classification does not preclude the use of other categorisations where this is appropriate.

The classification is designed to be a framework for general statistical analyses. The classification may be helpful for targeting policies or funding. However, this needs to be tested on a case by case basis including analysis of other relevant data sets such as Indices of Deprivation, levels of service provision and so on.

The classification is set up to be a measure of settlement pattern and context. It does not consider the issues of land use beyond land used for residential purposes.

The great strength of the classification is in providing a framework to be used in broad statistical analyses. Conversely, it is less robust when we wish to consider the characteristics of *individual* local areas.

There are two main problems with considering specific localities. Firstly the classification is derived from a set of decision rules. At an aggregate level the exact specification of these rules is not critical. A small change in the criteria will lead to a small change in the classification. However, locally such small changes can be significant. A particular Output Area may for example change from being a village to a small town because of a very small change in the criteria.

Secondly the classification does not consider the “look” or “feel” of a locality. It is simply an objective measure of the settlement pattern and context. This can lead to local anomalies where the classification does not agree with what local residents think about their area.

Taken together these limitations suggest that users should be cautious when using the classification to describe an individual local area. Although the classification can be useful as an initial pointer, other issues may need to be considered.

Frequently asked questions

Where can I get a digital copy of the Rural and Urban Area Classification?

The Rural and Urban Area Classification is available via the National Statistics website - <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/geography/nrudp> - in the form of data downloads. Formats available include: Comma Separated Value (CSV), Excel workbook (XLS) and textfile (TXT). The classification will later also be available via the Neighbourhood Statistics website.

How much does it cost to obtain a copy of the Rural and Urban Area Classification?

The classification is free of charge via the National Statistics website. Postcode look-up files (for which there may be a charge) are available from ons.geography@ons.gov.uk

Does the Rural and Urban Area Classification have statutory or regulatory force?

No. It is an advisory classification prepared by government bodies for England and Wales. It aims to encourage common standards of data presentation and statistical analysis, mainly in understanding socio-economic issues affecting people living in smaller populated places (rural) as opposed to bigger populated places (urban).

Does this Rural and Urban Area Classification therefore define what people think of as “the town” and “the countryside” as distinctive areas of England and Wales?

No, this is not its purpose. The classification is based on population densities across the whole spectrum of ‘settlements’, or built up areas, in the two countries. It enables certain types of geographical data comparisons e.g. employment levels, to be built on the same foundations. Broader issues of people’s perceptions of urban and countryside areas are not covered.

How can I view the Rural and Urban Area Classification on a map?

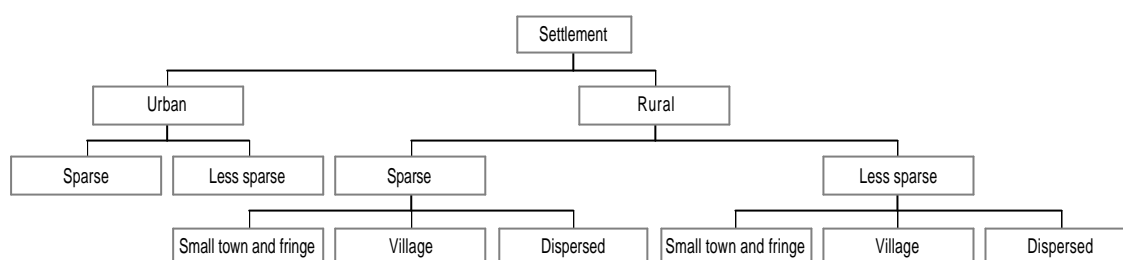
The methodological paper published alongside this introductory guide contains maps showing the new classification. We plan to make more maps available as part of the process for promoting use of the classification, and through the ONS Geography web pages.

For which statistical areas are the classified data available?

The data are currently available for Output Areas and 2003 Census Area Statistics (CAS) wards. Other geographies are being considered such as Super Output Areas, Primary Care Trusts, English Local Authority Districts and Unitary Authorities.

What is the structure of the new classifications?

The broad structure of the Rural and Urban Area Classification is shown below:



A more detailed settlement breakdown is available at hectare square and postcode level.

Have postcodes been classified by Rural and Urban Area Classifications?

This is currently being prepared. The Rural and Urban Area Classification will be added to the All Fields Postcode Directory (AFPD - maintained by ONS) in the near future. The AFPD can be obtained through the following webpage:

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/geography/afpd.asp>

How can the Rural and Urban Area Classification be used with other data?

The Rural and Urban Area Classifications can be used in accordance with Census 2001 data and various other small area data to enable an area based analysis. Boundary files (in ESRI shape file format) suitable for use in Geographical Information Systems can be obtained from ONS Census Customer Services: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/customerservices.asp>

How can the definition be applied to data sets that cover Great Britain or the United Kingdom?

Responsibility for rural and urban policies is devolved to the four UK nations. This definition covers England and Wales. Similar but different definitions are used in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Whilst rural and urban areas are defined differently, the measures should still be comparable. Just as comparisons are made between different regions or local authorities, so comparisons can legitimately be made between rural areas in England and Wales and rural areas in Scotland or Northern Ireland. However, users will need to exercise care in interpreting such information as any differences (for example, in distance to services), whilst real, may be a product of the different area definitions. Equally, data owners should make this clear if they present rural information for England and Wales alongside rural information for Scotland and Northern Ireland.

How do these Rural and Urban Area Classifications differ from the ODPM 2001 Urban Settlements?

ODPM's 2001 Urban Settlements (previously called Urban Areas) defines all settlements above 20 hectares where the land use is urban in character. This definition has been retained because it is a generic term that has been used in the past and continues to be of use in many policy applications. The ONS "*Key Statistics for Urban Areas*" is based upon the ODPM 2001 Urban Settlements and publishes figures for all settlements down to a population of 1,500 (in 1991 this was 1,000). The Rural and Urban Area Classification presented here uses the same 2001 Urban Settlements, and classifies as "Urban" those settlements where the population count is 10,000 or above. Below this level, settlements will be known as being within the 'rural domain', and ODPM will encourage users to recognise this Rural and Urban Area Classification as a useful tool for rural analysis.

When will the Rural and Urban Area Classification be updated?

The Project Board is proposing to update the classification on a five yearly basis.

Who can I contact with questions relating to the Rural and Urban Area Classification?

A list of the individual representatives of each organisation, who can answer related questions or consult the partners on technical and developmental issues arising, is given in Annex One attached.

Population Statistics for England and Wales

To give an overview of how the definitions can be used the table below demonstrates the population breakdown for April 2001 by area type for England and Wales at Output Area level.

Table 1: Population shares by settlement type

Settlement type	Context¹	Wales	England	Wales & England
Total persons('000s)(=100%)		2,903	49,139	52,042
percentage of total persons:				
Urban	Less sparse	62.3%	80.4%	79.4%
	Sparse	1.9%	0.2%	0.3%
Rural				
Small town and Fringe	Less sparse	12.8%	8.6%	8.8%
	Sparse	3.3%	0.4%	0.6%
Village	Less sparse	7.0%	6.7%	6.7%
	Sparse	5.2%	0.5%	0.8%
Dispersed	Less sparse	3.2%	2.8%	2.8%
	Sparse	4.2%	0.3%	0.5%

Source: Census 2001

¹ The context category refers to the wider surrounding area of settlements. When analysing data that falls into categories such as 'Small town and Fringe' and 'Sparse', users should interpret this as the proportion of the population in small town and fringe areas surrounded by sparsely populated areas.

Annex One – Partnership Contacts

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ONS provide general support on the use of UK geography for statistics.

General enquiries:
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Information on the work of ONS
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