New Rural Definition

Background

1.   In 2002 a review of urban and rural area definitions in use by government[1] concluded that existing definitions failed to describe rural areas satisfactorily as a basis for analysis and targeting policy delivery. Work triggered by the review to produce a new definition now provides a means to describe modern rural England[2] so that we can apply the available evidence to help target policy to those groups, communities and businesses who most require support.

The basics of the new definition

2.   Until now, in the case of rural areas, there have been two main types of definition in use: one based upon land use and derived from the urban areas definition, the other based upon a social and economic classification of local authority districts subsequently extended to electoral wards. The report recommended that since measures of social and employment structure no longer clearly distinguished urban and rural areas (for example, because of declining employment in agriculture in rural areas), the best way forward was to focus on land use derived in such a way as to identify rural settlement patterns comprised of small rural towns, villages, hamlets and scattered dwellings.

3.   Since there was no land use information comparable with that for urban areas identifying small settlements, the latter were built up from individual addresses derived from the postcode system – the only source capable of providing both the national comprehensiveness and the high level of geographic detail required. The new rural definition consists of two parts:
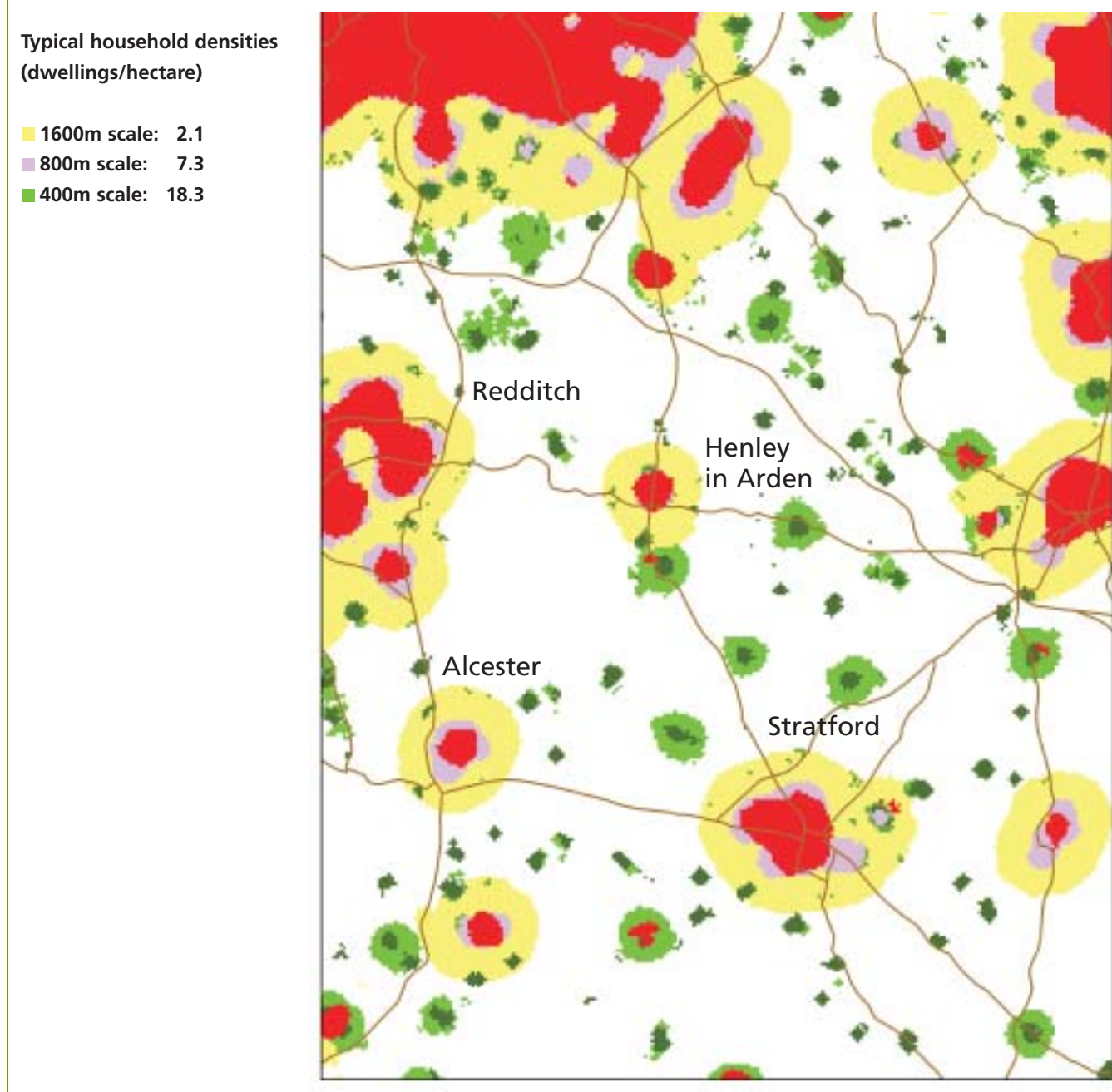
- the *settlement morphology* comprising all places under 10,000 population comprising small ('rural') towns, villages and scattered dwellings; and

- the wider geographic *context* in which individual settlements are located i.e. whether the wider area is defined as being 'sparsely' populated or not.

4.   Settlements and context are identified on a grid consisting of one hectare cells. This grid is the foundation of the definition. As an example, the depiction of settlements on part of this grid is shown in Figure 1.

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[1]   Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions 2002.

[2]   A joint Defra, Office for National Statistics, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Welsh Assembly and Countryside Agency project.

Figure 1: Henley in Arden – a rural town identified by density profiles

Typical household densities (dwellings/hectare)

- 1600m scale: 2.1
- 800m scale: 7.3
- 400m scale: 18.3

5. Figure 1 shows how the new definition can be used to build up an accurate local map of rural settlements, ranging from small rural towns, such as Henley in Arden (c 1,400 dwellings), villages and smaller hamlets and isolated dwellings.

6. 'Sparsity' refers to the broader setting in which settlements are located and is measured as the average density of households across areas of radius 10,000m, 20,000m and 30,000m.[3] These distances were chosen so as to broadly represent the costs of overcoming distance in the delivery of different types of rural service. An area is considered 'sparse' if it meets a minimum density criterion on all three distance measures (see Figure 2 below).

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[3] More accurately, each 1ha grid forms the centre of the calculation of these average densities.

Figure 2: The combined sparsity map

Dark blue: 'sparse' at all three geographical scales – 30km, 20km, 10km – used to devise the context measure for the rural definition.

Classifying rural areas

7. Having classified individual cells, the next step is to categorise the settlement characteristics of statistical and administrative units. This is designed to make it possible to use the definition with a wide range of statistical data, for example, data from the decennial population census. Three sorts of area are classified: Census Output Areas, Super Output Areas and electoral wards. Classification of these areas depends on identifying the proportion of population in each settlement type. The final classification scheme is shown in Figure 3 below and the classification of Output Areas is shown in Figure 4.
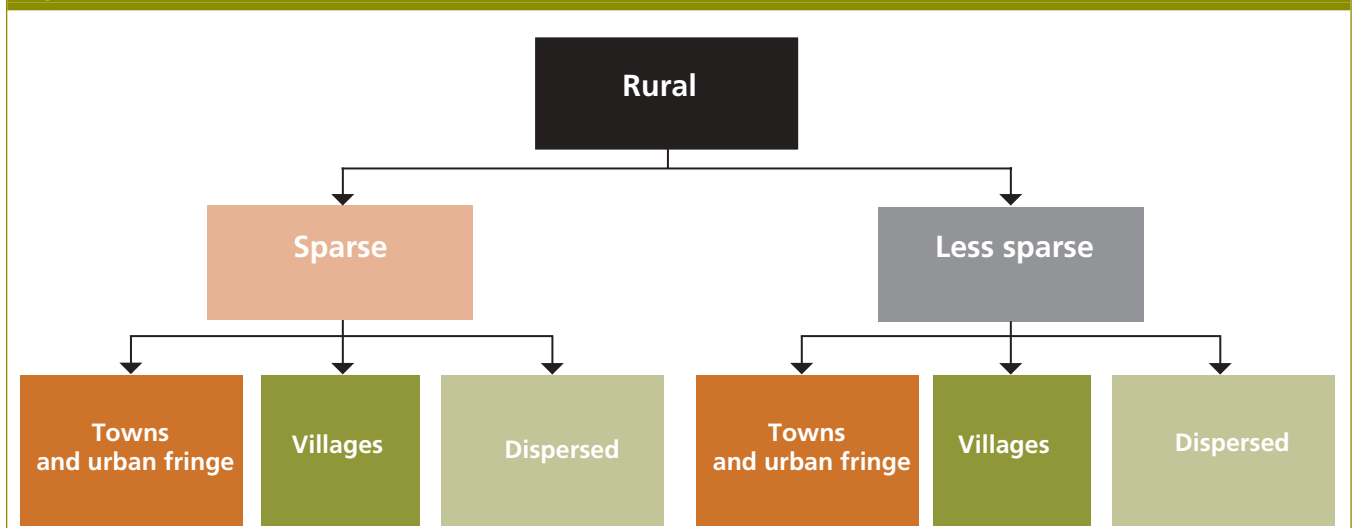
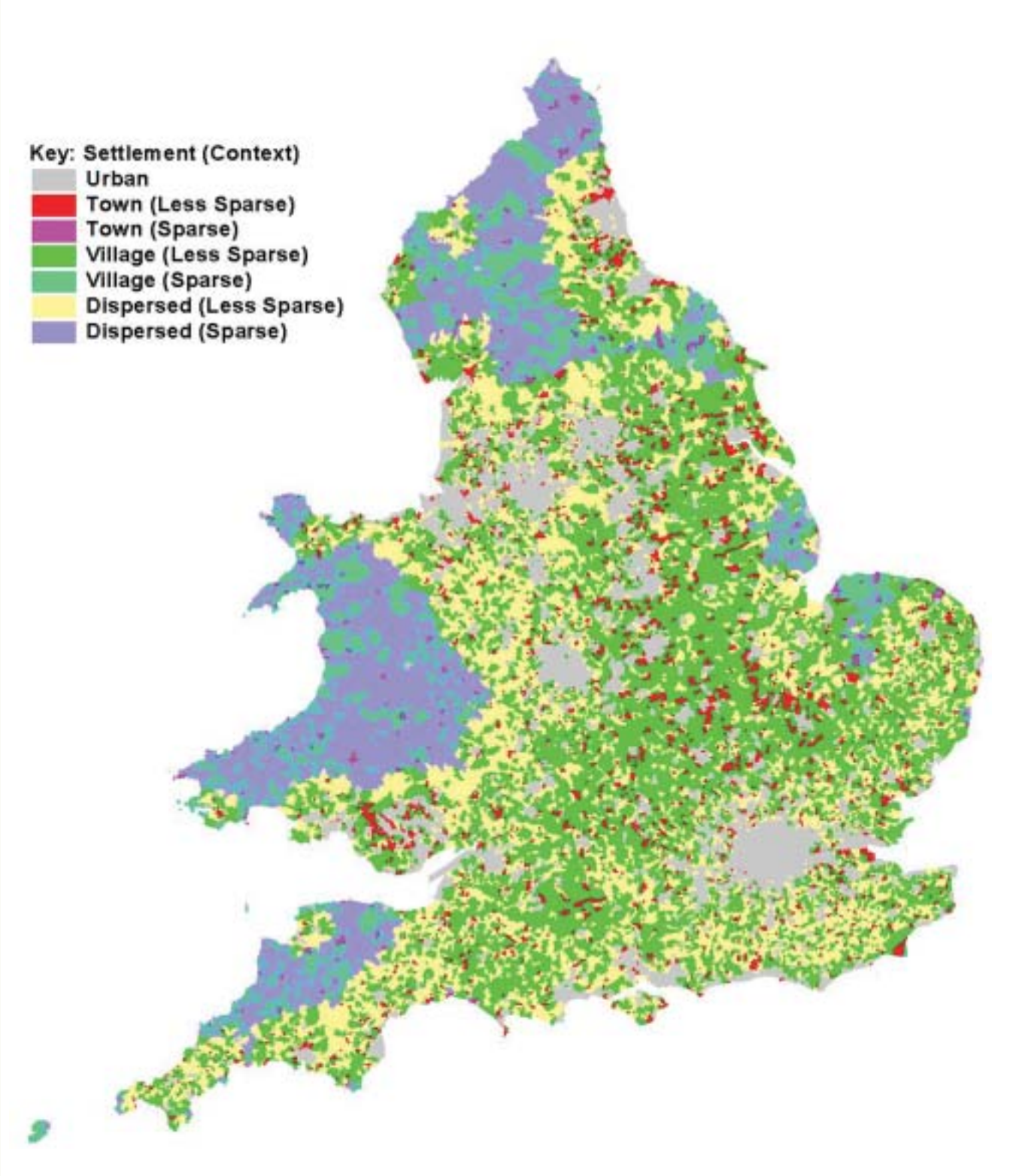**Figure 3: The new classification of rural areas**

Figure 4: Urban/rural classification of 2001 Census Output Areas

Key: Settlement (Context)
- Urban
- Town (Less Sparse)
- Town (Sparse)
- Village (Less Sparse)
- Village (Sparse)
- Dispersed (Less Sparse)
- Dispersed (Sparse)

Summary of new rural definition

8.   The new rural definition has been validated, following a public web-based validation exercise in Spring 2004. Over three quarters of the comments received during the validation period endorsed the new definition as a considerable improvement on the current definition. A detailed response to the points made in the validation exercise can be found in the validation report at: www.statistics.gov.uk/geography/nrudp.asp.

9.   The new rural definition is being launched today alongside this Rural Strategy. In summary, the new rural definition:

- extends the current Government 'land use' based definition of urban areas to include rural settlements of different sizes and kinds;

- recognises the differences between rural areas and moves away from crude urban/rural splits given the increasing difficulty in drawing a sharp line between the two;

- bases the description of 'rural' on factors that people recognise as important rural characteristics, for example the nature and distribution of towns, villages and dispersed areas;

- will allow 'fine grain' analysis of localities within rural areas, for rural delivery and targeting purposes; this will include analysis of economic and social peripherality in rural areas; and

- provides a means of basing social and economic data from, for example, the Census, on the more enduring features of rurality – namely the settlement pattern.

10.   The new definition is available to download from the Office for National Statistics website at: www.statistics.gov.uk/geography/nrudp.asp. Accompanying the definition 'look-up' table[4] is a user guide which provides advice on how the definition can be used to analyse rural statistics and a comprehensive methodology paper, which sets out how the definition was developed and the process by which it was validated and peer-reviewed.

11.   Defra will be working with other Government Departments and regional and local partners in taking forward how the new definition is applied and used to help target policy and delivery as set out in the Rural Strategy 2004.

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[4] A table which has a code for each item in common with another table containing data about that item. This enables two tables and the information they contain to be joined together. Thus the rural definition 'look-up' enables the categories of the rural definition for wards or output areas to be linked accurately to the neighbourhood statistics data for wards or output areas.