

Annex C

Interim Report and Consultation

This annex describes the conclusions of the interim report of the group that was circulated for consultation. The interim report can be viewed on the NISRA website at www.nisra.gov.uk. The references to sections refer to the interim report.

The interim report noted (Section 1) that although urban and rural issues are recognised as important, for a variety of reasons, there is an absence of any generally accepted definition of 'urban' and 'rural'.

The report went on to describe (Section 2) how the distinction between 'urban' and 'rural' is not clear cut. Three criteria were identified as relevant in defining towns and urban settlements: population size, population density and service provision. None of these, in isolation, is sufficient. Rural areas are characterised by dispersal of population, imposed by the predominant land use, and distance from urban centres.

The Group produced an initial Gazetteer of Northern Ireland settlements (Section 3), identifying 621 settlements and providing information on population (where available) and post office provision. Population estimates were made for each settlement, based on the statistics available at that time; these population estimates were based on information available prior to the publication of results from the 2001 Census.

An initial analysis (section 4) suggested a cut off population of 2,250 since no settlement larger than that lacked a post office. A provisional hierarchy of settlements was identified and more detailed work confirmed that this hierarchy corresponded to population, internal structure and transport characteristics. It was noted that the relative importance of service provision by various settlements does not always correspond to the importance of the settlements based on the hierarchy structure. Accordingly, the Group recommended in the Interim Report that Departments and other users should use the final settlement bands and settlements in the way that best meets their needs. The degree to which the settlement bands identified can be regarded as urban varies (eg Belfast Metropolitan Area is more urban than Small Town/village) and this should be taken into account in determining the use made of the banding. The classification should be regarded as no more than provisional as it currently takes no account of private sector services, community and voluntary sector services, public sector services and accessibility.

The report discussed (Section 5) the provision of services, noting that there is little information on private sector services and employment in settlements, but a pilot investigation established that there is much variation in service provision and that population size is not an adequate proxy for service provision. The Group recommended in the Interim Report that a project be established to examine the sources available to establish private

sector service and community/voluntary sector service provision and employment availability in settlements, and to produce an improved classification of services regarded as basic/good/wide. This would assist with the monitoring of urban health and development, as well as in refining urban/rural classifications; this project should be taken forward by an inter-departmental group.

Public sector provision also characterizes settlements, and this was described in Section 6. Accordingly, the Group recommended in the Interim Report that when an operational definition of settlements is available, a project be established to use the existing GIS data sources available for establishing public sector service provision and employment availability. This would assist with the monitoring of urban health and development, as well as in refining urban/rural classifications. This work should be carried forward by the group referred to in the paragraph above.

Section 7 describes how the utility of services is not governed simply by their presence or absence. It is necessary for users to reach those services, and for many purposes, remote areas should be distinguished from more accessible areas. The Group recommended in the Interim Report that a project be established to assess access to settlement services, taking account of public and private transport availability.

The delineation of settlements is necessary to allow full use to be made of the classification (Section 8). In line with this, the Group recommended in the Interim Report that, in view of current planning practice the Belfast Metropolitan Area (Belfast Urban Area, Bangor, Carrickfergus, Carryduff, Helen's Bay and Crawfordsburn), and the Craigavon Urban Area (Portadown, Lurgan and Craigavon) should be regarded as two integrated settlements despite the fact that their component built-up areas are not contiguous.

The Group recommended in the Interim Report that its report should be given wide circulation, both inside and outside government, and that a final report is produced, taking account of comments received.

Consultation

The report was circulated to 70 bodies and individuals, and twelve responses were received. These responses (summarised below) were broadly supportive of the idea of view that urban-rural was not a simple dichotomy, although there was some concern that 'rural' was being treated as a residual category. The use of services for settlement classification was welcomed, and a variety of points were made concerning services. Accessibility of services and intra-settlement variations were also noted as worthy of attention. As regards the specific recommendations of the interim report, none of the respondents expressed any objection to any of them. Positive support was for the following:

- Use of settlement bands appropriate to user's needs
- Interdepartmental group to establish levels of private sector and voluntary/community services in settlements
- Interdepartmental group to establish levels of public sector services in settlements
- Interdepartmental group assess levels of access to services in settlements
- Acceptance of Belfast Metropolitan and Craigavon Urban Areas as fragmented settlements
- Delineation of settlements on postcode or other small area basis
- Widespread circulation of results

This was taken as a broad consensus among respondents on the recommendations. There was greatest support for flexible use of definitions; assessment of services and access to these; and delineation of settlements on a small area basis.

Summary of responses to consultation on Interim Report

1. Individual response. The respondent expressed concern regarding circumstances of intra-urban communities. On the subject of services, the respondent queried the relative weights used and highlighted the importance of primary schools, but accepted the importance of assessing the relative importance of services. The respondent noted the decline in farming and impact of urban dwellers on rural land prices. The status of settlements on the fringes of Derry and the Belfast Metropolitan area was noted as an issue of debate, as was the use of travel time. In subsequent correspondence, the respondent suggested that government could do little to influence or attract service provision, although it could inhibit provision. The respondent suggested ways to assess the catchment population of various types of service through consultation, and highlighted the significance of a primary school to villages.
2. Rural Development Council. The Council was concerned at the absence of its own material from consideration by the report, and mentioned the need for a clear simple consultation document. It discerned an urban bias in the report, with 'rural' being defined by what it is not. Although the Council tended to agree with the report's view that a single definition of urban and rural was not of practical use, it suggested that many in the public arena would not be satisfied with the lack of a single definition. It mentioned functionality, natural resource use, landscape character and land ownership as further factors, as well as mentioning services other than a post office as relevant. The concept of "urban health" (and similarly, "rural health") was useful if based on a wider range of services.

3. Belfast Education and Library Board. The Board suggested that any project to assess service provision should include voluntary and statutory youth services, primary and secondary education and libraries. The issues of neighbourhood effects within larger settlements and distance-decay should be taken into account.
4. Antrim Borough Council. The council produced a response paper, noting the overlap between 'urban' and 'rural', but welcoming the attempt to achieve clarity of definitions despite the difficulty of producing a single definition. The paper noted the possible impact of a reducing scale of service provision on a classification dependent on a single service. A wide range of issues needed to be taken into account, and weighted, in any classification. The paper recommended that NISRA should undertake delineation of settlement boundaries.
5. Lisburn City Council. The council's consultant submitted a response on their behalf, welcoming the SCG report, and noting the importance of a single classification system for planning purposes, given that the council had 38 settlements of various classifications. The response suggested discussion with Planning Service concerning a common approach to the proposed flexible hierarchy. It also agreed that services needed to be included in urban-rural classification, although post office provision was not an infallible proxy. The response drew attention to the issue of resident perception, mental mapping and accessibility (including social exclusion) as 'soft' areas worthy of attention.
6. Ballymoney Borough Council. The council agreed that extent of service provision should form part of the categorisation of services. They corrected some of the data used by the working group and presented further information on services, which they suggested, provided a basis for reclassification of Ballymoney as a medium rather than a small town.
7. Rural Community Network. The Network agreed that urban/rural formed a continuum, and argued that 'rural' should not be treated as a residual or purely agricultural.
8. Northern Ireland Housing Executive. NIHE accepted that a single urban-rural definition was not practical and welcomed work using population size, population density and service level. They noted the need to improve and update the reports gazetteer, and drew attention to the Planning Service typology. NIHE voiced a concern at the urban focus of the report, and noted the need to review the classification to take account of changes over time.
9. Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. The council welcomed a standardised delineation of settlements, noting that it viewed the Parish as a robust definition of a community. It suggested that 15-20 minute travel times were a useful benchmark.

10. Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland. OSNI drew attention to its function and the data that it held, as particularly relevant to the delineation of settlements. They hold a gazetteer of 330 cities, towns and villages and are involved in the Pointer system, although they note certain problems with the use of postcodes in settlement delineation. OSNI suggest that the working group might wish to make contact with them.
11. Belfast City Council. The Council agreed that an overly simple urban-rural divide would be of limited value, given the difference and within larger settlements. The Council would welcome further consultation and involvement both in the initial project and in further projects. It noted the impact of neighbourhood boundaries and sectarianism on access to services. Given the flexibility of the proposed system, the council suggested that it might be useful to issue further guidance on its use.
12. South Eastern Education and Library Board. The Board tends to distinguish between larger settlements (roughly medium town and larger in the Report classification). Issues of accessibility were important and the Board suggested that the proposed research in this area should be undertaken. A common, but flexible, definition of settlements was welcome, and it was felt that a binary definition [of urban/rural] was unhelpful.