



The Rural Challenge in Cumbria

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1. Introduction

Cumbria Rural Forum, working with Action with Communities in Cumbria, creates opportunities to debate rural issues and stimulates collaborative responses to key rural challenges. Through events, workshops and discussion papers it encourages debate about the obstacles faced by rural people in securing a sustainable future and works to identify relevant and practicable solutions.

Based on recent such activities, this paper summarises six key issues that participants in Cumbria Rural Forum have identified as those which they consider to be the greatest challenges to the future of rural communities. The paper reflects evidence drawn from day to day contact with rural Cumbrians and published research and data produced by government agencies, local authorities and other third parties.

2. The Rural Challenge

Rural communities face multiple challenges if they are to sustain a viable social, economic and environmental life into the future. Not every issue is different from those that face urban populations but it is often the case that different solutions are required. The key concerns in 2010, based on a poll of Cumbria Rural Forum participants, are, in priority order:

- Accessibility
- Affordable Housing
- Fuel Poverty
- Age Structure
- Sparsity and Rurality
- Low Incomes

Accessibility

The national Index of Deprivation 2007 (ID) highlights a particular challenge for Cumbria's rural residents. The ID uses bundles of indicators to identify localities which experience differing types of deprivation. Two of these, the Barriers to Housing and Services Domain and the Geographical Barriers to Access Domain help to give a picture of the challenge faced by Cumbrian communities, especially those in more remote areas, in accessing the services and facilities that they need (see graph below).

Of the 324 super output areas¹ (SOA) in Cumbria some 16% fall into the most deprived 10% in England for Barriers to Housing and Services while 25% fall into the most deprived 10% in England for Geographical Barriers. Eden is the most deprived district in mainland England in terms of the Geographical Barriers domain. On the same domain, Crummock ward in Allerdale is the second most deprived ward and Lyne ward (Carlisle) the third most deprived ward in England.

The impact of these challenges is heightened by several factors including the infrequency and limited coverage of public transport in more remote areas and the surprisingly large number of rural households with no private car or van. 18,365 rural households have no car or van, 36% of all such households in Cumbria².

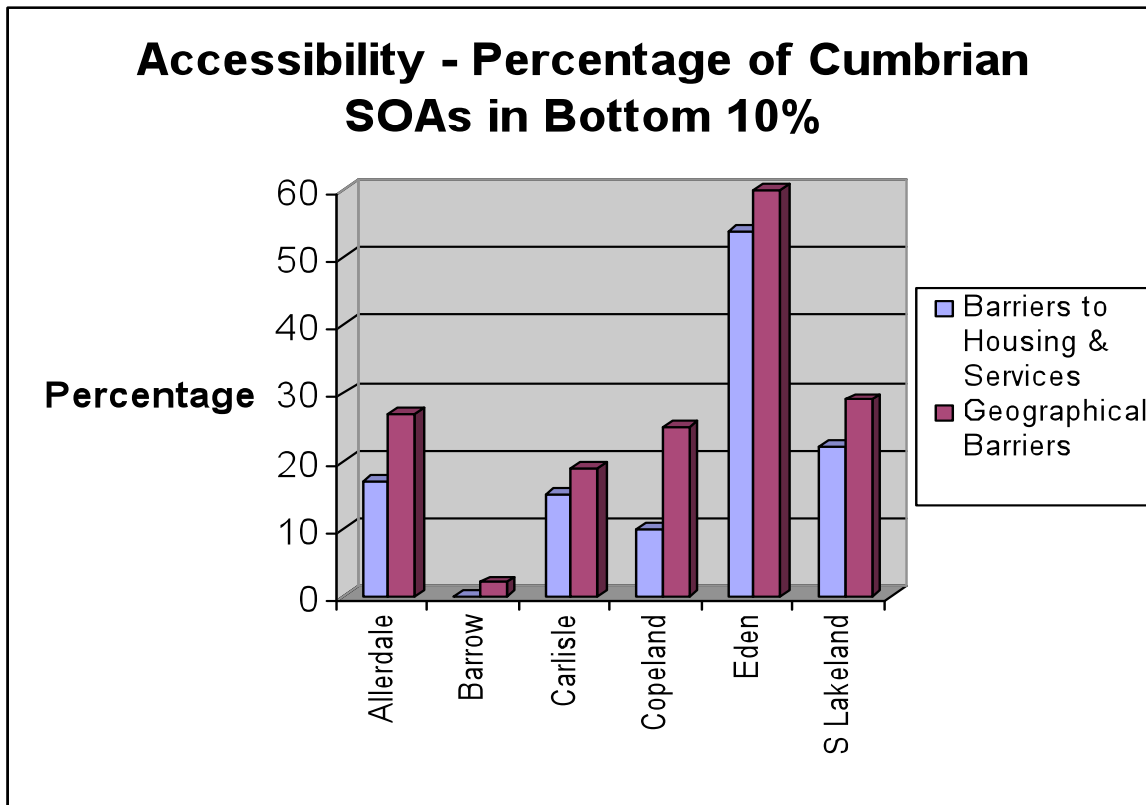
Rural households are also disadvantaged in their use of new technologies to access web-based services, information and social opportunities. The nature of the rural telephone infrastructure and the length of line between telephone exchanges and homes or business premises mean that, for many, broadband speeds are little if any better than dial up services. This is a serious impediment to the use of business services, NHS Direct, education resources, social networking and other provision that might otherwise mitigate the disadvantages of remoteness.

Cover Photo: Rural services are under threat - The George and Dragon Inn, Garrigill, where local people are planning a cooperative buy out to save a 400 year old inn. Photo – Mike Povey

¹ A Super Output Area (SOA) is a geographical area designed for the collection and publication of small area statistics that is widely used throughout national statistics.

² Source: Census 2001

Faced with a combination of contracting services, and rises in both fuel prices and levels of fuel poverty, rural residents are likely to become increasingly disadvantaged.



Affordable Housing

A high level of in-migration to, and increasing second home ownership in, our beautiful but low income communities has driven the cost of housing out of reach of local people, especially the young. The gap between lower quartile household incomes and house prices is among the widest in the country.

While this challenge is widely recognised the routes by which it can be addressed are complex, constrained by funding and reliant upon effective partnership working.

A report published by Cumbria County Council helps to illustrate the impact of this challenge. Using data on pay and house prices³, the report shows that the wards with the highest Affordability Ratio (median house price to median income) include much of South Lakeland together with Millom Without (Copeland), Crummock and Boltons (Allerdale) and Askham, Dacre, Long Marton and Ravenstonedale (Eden).

However, the report then considers the proportion of households in each ward who can afford the median house price as a way of taking into account the widely varying average household incomes that are typical of many communities. This analysis shows that the impact of affordability runs much more widely than the Affordability Ratio would suggest, with less than 10% of households able to afford the median price in 63 (37.5%) of Cumbria's 168 wards. These are spread across South Lakeland, much of Eden and some of the Lake District wards of Allerdale and Copeland.

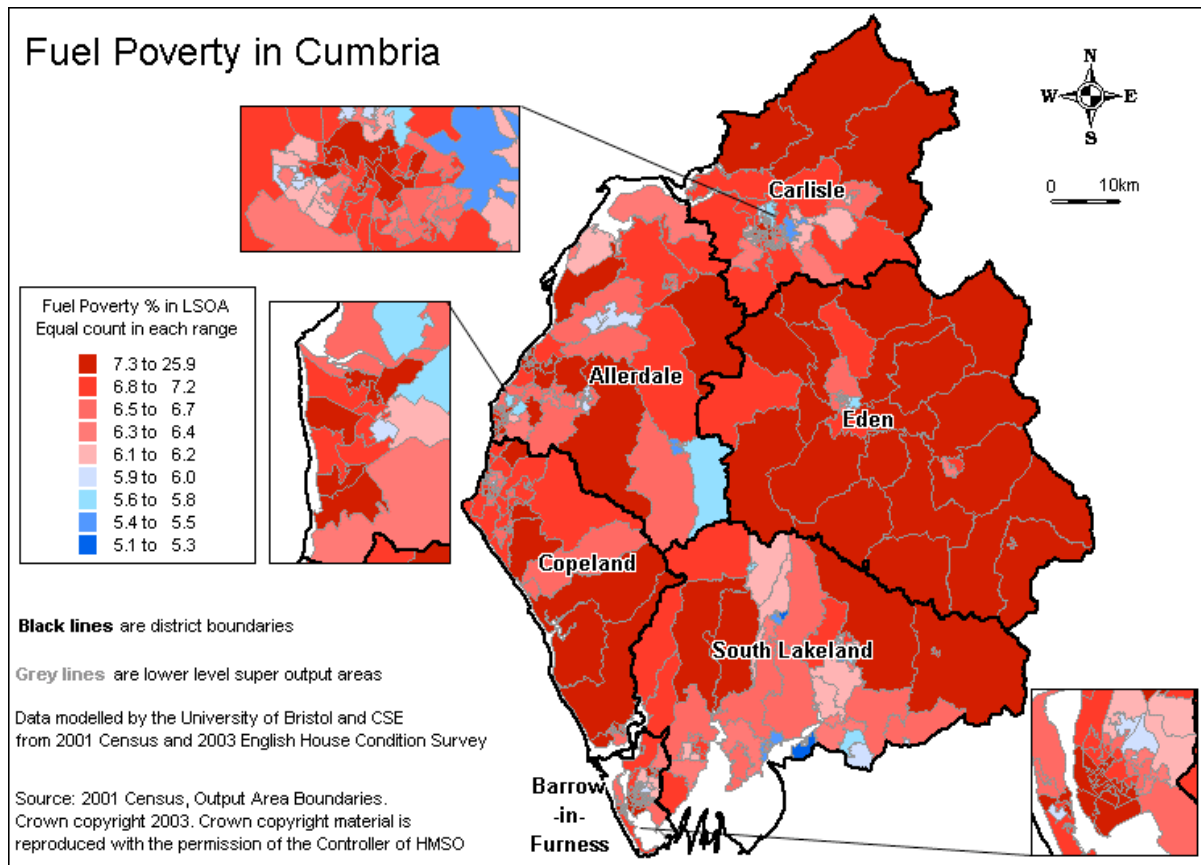
Fuel Poverty

Increasing fuel poverty is an immediate and significantly rural consequence of rising fuel prices. Factors such as the need to travel, the age and poor thermal efficiency of much rural property and a reliance upon oil for heating all mean that rural communities exhibit relatively high levels of

³ Paycheck and Streetvalue data published by CACI, 2005

households affected by fuel poverty⁴. Published data⁵ shows that the more remote and sparsely populated communities of Cumbria are likely to have among the highest proportions of households in England that are affected.

Factoring in to this picture the fact that much of rural Cumbria has no mains gas supply means that the challenge of fuel poverty is particularly acute in the rural Eden Valley, the northern parts of Carlisle and wards in south Copeland.



Age Structure

Cumbria's communities, especially in the more accessible south and east of the County, have seen an influx of middle-aged and older people. This has been paralleled by an out-migration of young people in search of education, employment and social opportunity.

These trends result in an increasingly aged population structure for rural communities which impacts upon their vibrancy, capacity and sustainability. The trends will also result in social and support needs for rural elderly residents that may be difficult and costly to meet, although perhaps also creating community business opportunities.

2008 mid-year population estimates (see chart below) show that Cumbria's more urban communities (Barrow, Carlisle) have higher percentages of young people and lower percentages of older people than the County's more rural Districts.

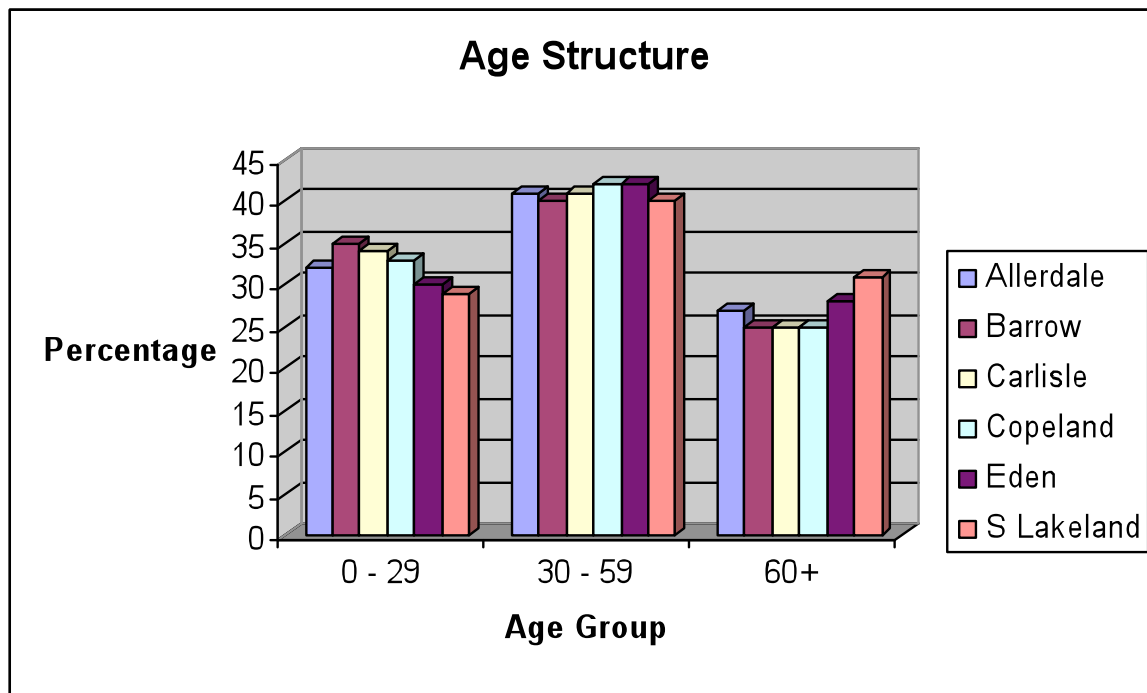
Long term projections through to 2029 suggest that these differences will become more exaggerated. Population growth will take place, with the highest rates of growth in Eden and South Lakeland. At the same time, the County's population structure will become increasingly dominated by older age groups with both young people and those of working age underrepresented, again with the greatest extremes in the east and south of the County. By 2029 it is estimated that 29.4% of the population will be over retirement age, compared with 21.8% for England and Wales.

⁴ Households are judged to experience 'fuel poverty' when they spend more than 10% of their income on domestic fuel use.

⁵ The Fuel Poverty Indicator Website – www.fuelpovertyindicator.org.uk

These figures suggest three key impacts. There will be a relative decline in numbers of young people and a consequent reduction both in demand for the services that this sector of the population relies upon and the attraction that the area has for young people. Demand for services will shift towards those that are taken up by older adults, particularly caring services. A crucial third impact, often missed when assessing the impact of demographic change in the County, is the decline in the proportion of the population made up by working age people and therefore available to deliver services to the ageing population or raise the County's economic performance.

These trends have serious implications for the service and support needs of older people and the social sustainability of smaller and more remote communities.



Sparsity & Rurality

Compared with other English counties, an exceptional proportion of Cumbria's population lives in rural or sparsely populated rural areas.

Over half of Cumbria's population of 496,900 (2008 est.) live in rural areas, while 105,000 people live in areas defined by Government as 'sparsely populated'. Four of the six local authority districts fall within Defra's 'Rural 80' category while a fifth is classed as 'Significant Rural'.

Sparsity of population creates particular challenges in meeting needs. Notably, there is a substantial 'rural premium' associated with rural service delivery, in other words, rural delivery costs are higher. Sparsity of population also impacts upon the capacity of communities and their ability to take effective local action without external support.

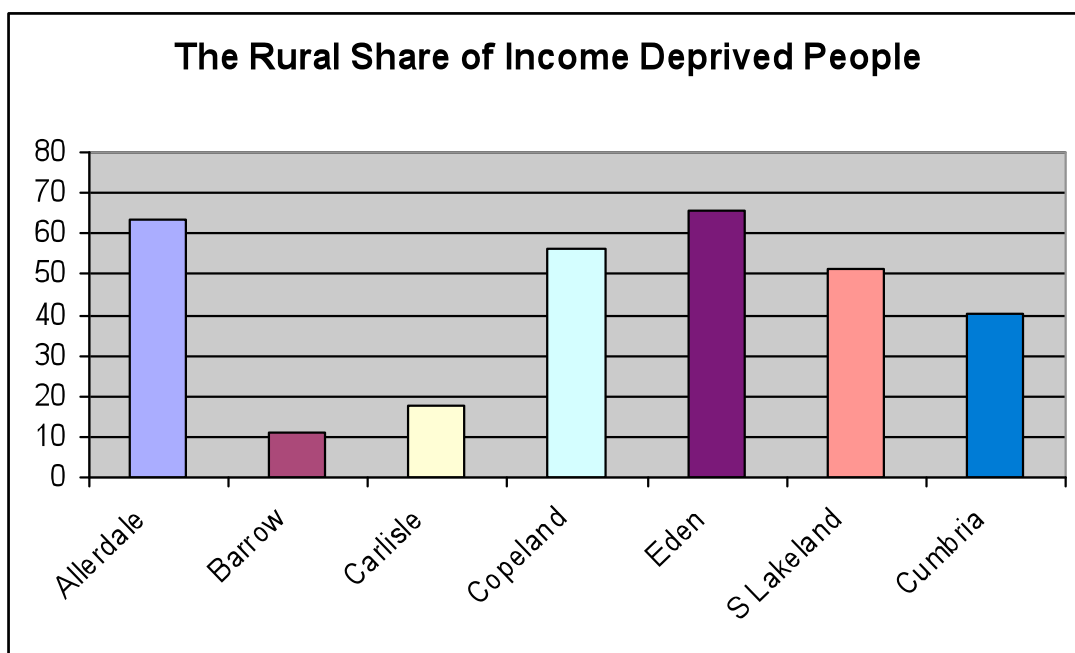
The large proportion of Cumbria's population that live in rural areas also impacts on the share of deprivation that is found dispersed within rural communities, rather than concentrated in urban locations. Examples are that 40% of Cumbria's 63,445 people affected by income deprivation live in rural areas, as do 38% of all people receiving out of work benefits and 45% of people with a limiting long term illness.

Low Incomes

Cumbria's rural economy is to a considerable extent dependent upon small businesses, many of which are in sectors such as agriculture, tourism and services offering low GVA⁶ and low pay levels. In reviewing "Paycheck 2005" data, the Cumbria Economic Bulletin⁷ reveals a scattering across the County of wards where household incomes are lower than average. A significant proportion of these are in the sparsely populated areas of northern Carlisle, Eden and North Allerdale.

Rural communities tend to be mixed in their makeup, with some residents commuting to work in urban locations or living on pension-based income while others depend upon low-paid rural employment. A consequence is the masking of a significant proportion of rural households that experience disadvantage and isolation.

Helping to highlight the extent to which rural communities are affected by economic disadvantage, over 50% of people affected by income deprivation in the Districts of Allerdale, Copeland, Eden and South Lakeland are rural residents. Similarly, over half of children living in income deprived households in Allerdale, Copeland and Eden also live in rural communities.



One extreme of rural low pay is underlined by data from the 2006/7 Farm Business Survey. Published on behalf of Defra, this suggests a catastrophic decline in upland farm incomes Cumbria, average net incomes on some upland holdings falling from £18,000 in 2003 to just £3,800 in 2006/07. However, it should be noted that incomes in other farming sectors have performed much better.

3. The Community Response

In the face of the challenges described, and the national context of financial stringency, communities seeking a sustainable future will increasingly have to find their own solutions. In many ways this is the "Big Society" approach that is now being advocated by Government but which has been a feature of life in rural Cumbrian communities for many years. Big Society solutions involve local people in taking control of the future of their community and driving forward the changes that they and their neighbours consider to be most important.

⁶ Gross Value Added – a measure of economic performance.

⁷ Published by the Centre for Regional Economic Development, University of Central Lancashire and the Cumbria Economic Intelligence Partnership.

In so doing, they have a number of tools and approaches available to them, together with the advice and support available through Action with Communities in Cumbria and other members of the Cumbria Rural Forum.

Among the tried and tested solutions are:

Managing Change - Communities need to work together to understand their problems, prioritise needs for the future and plan the actions that will be necessary if they are to achieve their aims. Community Led Planning is an established and effective process of developing action plans that is built upon wide engagement with all sectors of the community and is recognised by Government as a valuable tool for mobilising community activity.

Asset Based Community Development - The most direct way in which communities are able to respond to change and address local needs is through the more effective management of the assets (buildings, land, local funds, etc.) that they control. The Coalition Government's recent proposals concerning the Right to Bid and the Right to Build recognise this.

Enterprise - Locally-owned social enterprises are becoming increasingly important in the efficient management of services and facilities. They also have potential to generate surpluses that can be used to fund other community resources. For example, there are emerging examples of community-owned renewable energy schemes, managed for social benefit, that enable communities to support and sustain village halls, shops and community activities.

Community Initiatives - Community Supported Agriculture initiatives, Local Development Trusts and Community Land Trusts are increasingly important to communities that are seeking to promote local food production, address the absence of affordable housing or make better use of local physical assets to realise their ambitions. Initiatives of this type underpin the work of the communities that make up the recently announced Big Society Vanguard in the Eden valley in Cumbria.

Advocacy - In the environment described, where policy may not meet local needs and there is increasing competition for limited public resources, rural communities will need to engage or be supported in effective advocacy at all levels.

Collaboration / Networking - Many rural communities and community groups face similar challenges and seek to implement similar locally-owned solutions. Networking between communities to share experience and gain mutual support is essential to enabling success.

4. Conclusion

Cumbria's rural communities exist in an increasingly complex and challenging world, one where a variety of political, economic, environmental and social issues place their sustainability in question.

Most important in sustaining "Big Society" in the small places and communities of rural Cumbria is the energy and initiative of community members. However, effective partnership working is also critical. This brings together the skills and resources of local people and their community leaders with those of elected representatives, the public sector and infrastructure bodies such as rural community councils. The Big Society Vanguard communities of the rural Eden Valley will offer hugely important lessons for many others, both in Cumbria and elsewhere in England, about the way in which the value of each of these contributions can be maximised in order to deliver real, local and lasting benefits.



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