

Introduction

This *Rural Policy Review of England* is part of the ongoing work activity of the Rural Policy Programme of the OECD. The broad goals for the set of reviews are to identify how a particular country conducts its rural policies, and, to use this information to help all OECD member countries develop more coherent frameworks for future rural policy that reflects current best practices in other countries. In particular, the reviews focus on how countries can help improve the efficiency of the local economies within their rural regions, so that rural citizens and firms can achieve their full potential.

In order to assess the policies in a country the OECD has to first understand conditions within that country and the existing policy context. Every country has a unique set of geographical, social and economic conditions within its rural territory and these both shape and constrain the types of activities that are carried out within rural areas. Further, every country has its own set of political institutions that also determine the types of function that different levels of government undertake. In many cases, this takes the form of supra-national relationships, such as membership in the European Union or participation in various multilateral obligations, which also have implications for national rural policy.

It is also important to recognise that the term “rural policy” has a broad range of interpretations within the OECD member countries. It is probably the case that each member country has its own specific sense of the domain of rural policy. For the reader of this report it is important to keep in mind that the broad sense of “rural policy” used here is unlikely to correspond to the national perspective. While we do not provide a specific definition of rural policy, the sense in which it is used in the OECD is the set of policies and programmes that help improve the economic and social well-being of rural residents.

Understandably, while there are great similarities in the types of problems facing rural residents, rural firms and rural local governments across the OECD countries, there are also important differences among OECD countries that will lead to different approaches to rural development. Moreover, it is increasingly clear that there may be significant differences in conditions and opportunities within any OECD country that further complicate the development of a national rural policy.

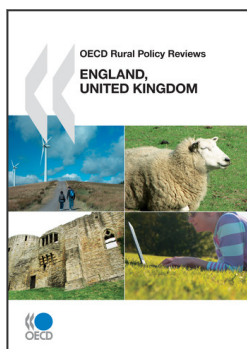
Thus, to ensure that the review considers both the National Rural Policy and the pertinent “issues” impacting policy design and implementation, the country under review prepares a background document for the OECD. This foundation document, referred to, as the *OECD Background Report* contains important analytical and statistical information and sets out the basic conditions found in its rural areas and outlines the existing rural policy. This report is then supplemented by: i) information contained in the OECD Territorial Database that provides comparable international data; ii) information generated from the different “rural” visits to different areas in the country under review; and, iii) information from prior OECD work.

An important part of this process is the series of “rural” field visits, which provide a context to understand the statistics, build on the information contained in the background report, as well as afford an opportunity to better identify how policies operate “on the ground”. During the visits, one-on-one and group discussions are undertaken with a range of relevant government (policy makers from different levels of government) and non-government stakeholders. The key issues in England were: Service Delivery, Housing Policy and Economic Development, and the visits were linked to these themes. As a result, the OECD team undertook three study missions in 2009. The first was to the South West Region to discuss housing, the second to the North East/North West Region for meetings on economic development, and the third to the East/West Midlands to discuss service delivery challenges in England.

The analytical perspective that provides a common reference point for this, and all Reviews, is the OECD New Rural Paradigm (NRP). Since its publication in 2006, the methodology of the NRP has been accepted by OECD member governments as a framework for designing a new generation of rural policies that are oriented to improving the competitiveness of rural areas and in so doing improve their contribution to national economic development objectives. The main policy focus of the NRP is to identify potential investment opportunities in rural areas that can lead to more effective resource use and increase productivity.

This review has four chapters. The first chapter frames rural England in terms of key indicators and changes. Chapter two describes the evolution of rural policy in England, plus the existing policy design and mechanisms. The third and fourth chapters form the core, as they contain the assessment and recommendations. In chapter three the performance of current policy is assessed in terms of goals identified by England and against the requirements of the NRP. Then in chapter four recommendations are suggested that could improve policy efficiency and help increase the competitive position of rural England, while paying attention to other important policy dimensions, such as environmental protection or preservation of important cultural amenities.

The analysis and recommendations by the OECD are based upon work conducted prior to the 2010 elections in the United Kingdom and reflect conditions in England, UK in 2009. The policy assessment and recommendations provided in the review are not based upon a detailed examination of existing conditions and policies. Detailed analysis of this type is best conducted by the member country. Instead the OECD review provides a reflection on rural policy in England that is based on the documents provided by the country, the experience of the review team in-country, and draws on knowledge from previous OECD work. The review offers suggestions that reflect the experience of other OECD countries and tries to identify the strengths and weaknesses associated with policy initiatives. The recommendations are not presented in order of priority, nor are they designed to offer a clear path for designing specific policies.



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