



*Routledge Studies in Sustainability*

# **RURAL GOVERNANCE IN THE UK**

**TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE AND EQUITABLE SOCIETY**

Edited by  
Adrienne Attorp, Sean Heron and  
Ruth McAreavey



‘With its key emphases on rural governance, land use and rural communities, in the backdrop of sustainability, this edited volume provides valuable insights on “the rural”. It undertakes an original examination of the issues and synergies around agri-food systems, energy production, forestry, mineral extraction, patriarchal structures and the growing topic around the impact of digitisation on rurality. The collection’s wide, holistic approach draws together perspectives from different disciplines reflecting the multifaceted and synergistic nature of the rural.’

**Dr Ludivine Petetin and Dr Mary Dobbs**, *Authors of  
Brexit and Agriculture (Routledge 2022). Respectively, Senior  
Lecturer in Law, Cardiff University and Lecturer in Law,  
Maynooth University*

‘This timely volume brings together a rich understanding of the rural which will inform discussions about the UK post-Brexit much more widely: too long has the rural been “left behind” in analysing where the UK is going, or, when considered, only through the prism of farming and agricultural land-use. Here instead, the authors offer a multifaceted analysis of the rural and the challenges we face in making the rural, across the four UK nations, more sustainable.’

**Dr Viviane Gravey**, *Queen’s University Belfast,  
co-chair of Brexit and Environment*

‘What would it take to work towards sustainable and equitable rural governance in a post-Brexit world? This timely book addresses this vital question, of relevance not only for the United Kingdom but for all of us working on questions of sustainability and justice in the present – in a time of great uncertainty, of climate change, the pandemic and of a full-scale war in our midst.’

**Seema Arora-Jonsson**, *Professor, Rural Development in  
Sweden and Europe, Swedish University of  
Agricultural Sciences*



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# Rural Governance in the UK

This book provides a multidisciplinary analysis of rural society in a post-Brexit UK by examining the emergence of new environmental and rural policies and the implications of this transition for rural communities.

Through the Common Agricultural Policy, Common Fisheries Policy, the Birds and Habitats Directives, the Water Framework Directive and a myriad of other legislations and institutions, the EU has had a deciding role in how the UK's rural environment is governed. Disentangling this policy legacy is a complex process and offers both opportunities and challenges for policymakers, institutions, organisations and stakeholders across the UK as they strive to create appropriate new governance structures.

With the Agriculture Bill, the 25-Year Environment Plan and the founding of the Office of Environmental Protection, the UK government has provided at least a degree of clarity on the future direction of environmental governance, but much remains uncertain, not least how this is engaged with by different stakeholders. While Brexit is the lens through which rural policy and sustainability are interrogated, this collection demonstrates the underpinning features of rural policy and society, identifying opportunities for addressing deep-seated policy weaknesses, thereby creating a more sustainable and equitable rural society.

This book brings together academics, established and early career, to discuss the impact of Brexit on rural environmental governance and on the wider sustainability of rural society, relating to three overall themes: rural governance, sustainable land use and sustainable rural communities. In doing so, it considers sectors beyond agriculture, paying attention to social relations, community infrastructure, the environment, rural development and broader issues of land use.

This book will be of interest to students and scholars of rural development, rural entrepreneurship, rural digital inclusion, environmental policy, sustainable development, land use, agrarian studies and environmental geography.

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Ruth McAreavey



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# 1 Rural governance in the UK

## Towards a sustainable and equitable society

*Sean Heron, Ruth McAreavey and Adrienne Attorp*

### Introduction

When we had the initial idea for this collection, the big talking point in the UK was the country's exit from the EU. Climate change was also at the forefront of the minds of many, due in part to the scheduled COP26 summit in 2020 and the campaigning efforts of activists such as Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future school strikers who were attempting to hold world leaders to account for their perceived lack of action. Since that time, public attention has been diverted by the global Covid-19 pandemic and, most recently, by the geo-political unrest arising from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As we make final edits to the collection, England has just experienced its first ever Red Extreme Heat warning and a record temperature of just over 40 degrees. Meanwhile deadly wildfires have swept across Greece, Spain, Portugal and France. All of these events have relevance to our focus on rural governance in the UK because they influence the wider context of policy-making.

As the pandemic emerged, it disrupted global supply chains, with impacts being felt at a household level as access to certain goods became restricted. The expansion of the public sector in the UK, mirroring government actions elsewhere, sought to protect the many millions of workers who lost their jobs due to public health advice to 'stay at home' and the subsequent slowdown of the general economy. The knock-on effect of the pandemic continues, with economies struggling to accommodate ongoing worker absences due to Covid-19 infection and associated ill-health. Meanwhile, we are facing a cost-of-living crisis as the cost of goods and services continues to rise significantly. In the 12 months to February 2022, prices rose 6.2% on average. The Office of Budget Responsibility predicts that, in the UK, inflation will reach a 40-year high by the end of 2022. Food inflation alone is expected to reach 15 percent. The shocks to the economy wrought by the pandemic clearly play a role in this, but their impact cannot be disentangled from other shocks, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The ramifications of Russian actions in Ukraine are manifold. The alleged war crimes and abuses of human rights are the most startling and frightening aspect of this conflict. However, in the context of our collection, the impact on sustainability is also notable. Globalised markets mean that some countries have been

reliant on Russian gas and are now struggling to identify alternatives. Russia is also one of the world's largest suppliers of fertilisers, the price of which has risen by 30% since the start of 2022 (BMPA, 2022; Helmore, 2022), and of metals used in many everyday goods, including aluminium food cans. Ukraine, meanwhile, is a major producer of wheat, often referred to as 'the bread basket of Europe'. It also supplies products for the fertiliser market. The impact of this will be felt within rural economies across the globe, including within the UK. Already there are reports of emerging fertiliser technologies and practices, spurred by these massive price hikes (Farming Today, Radio 4, 29.03.22, 30.03.22, 31.03.22). This demonstrates how the economy and related behaviours are able to adapt to changing circumstances.

Challenges created by the Covid-19 pandemic and geo-political unrest are compounding those already arising from the climate crisis, which continues to intensify. For example, shortages of wheat resulting from the Russia–Ukraine conflict are exacerbating already high wheat prices, which jumped by 90% in 2021 following drought and record heatwaves in Canada, one of the world's other major wheat suppliers (Wood, 2021; Tully, 2022). This has significant implications for food security globally, including in the UK, where the cost of living crisis is reportedly forcing many to choose between heating their homes and buying groceries (Partington, 2022; Tully, 2022).

These crises bring the rural to the fore, either by highlighting the integral role that rural areas play in ensuring a sustainable future (be that related to debates around issues such as food security, energy production or biodiversity) or by demanding that we change how we interact with the rural. The Covid-19 pandemic underscored the role rural areas play in food production as well as their importance as a place of recreation for urbanites. Responding effectively to the climate crisis requires that the carbon footprint of producing food, energy and raw materials be drastically reduced. A correlated biodiversity crisis also raises questions about how our food is produced and leads to a broader discussion about land use, public goods and nature recovery.

As these multiple crises have intensified, the United Kingdom has been undergoing historical political change. The 2016 referendum vote to leave the European Union was realised in January 2020. Since then, the UK has been responsible for setting policies in many domains that were previously determined by the European Union. The process of disentangling the UK from the EU policy framework has really only just begun. Many of the policy areas target or disproportionately affect rural areas, with implications for agriculture, fisheries, environment, energy and regional policy.

This collection aims to offer an analysis of the impact of Brexit on rural areas, in particular how governance is changing as a result of Brexit, and what Brexit means for rural sustainability in the UK. While Brexit acts as the driver for this collection, it is also about one of the world's largest economies creating new policies for rural areas. This is complicated by a system of asymmetric devolution, by the process of negotiating major new trade agreements, and by the need to ensure that legislation remains operable outside the EU – all while effectively

addressing future challenges, including the climate crisis, many of which are not fully understood. Therefore, the chapters that follow are about more than Brexit and will be of interest to scholars who research the range of topics captured in the collection including environmental governance, rural development, rural enterprise and agri-food systems. In the remainder of this chapter, we elaborate on the underpinning theme of sustainability before presenting an overview of each of the chapters.

## Sustainability

Sustainability has for a long time exercised the minds of policymakers. Back in 1987, the UN Brundtland Commission defined it as “[D]evelopment that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The three pillars of sustainability – environment, social and economic – are not necessarily considered in equal terms. Early on, environmental issues became equated with the notion of sustainability while social and economic considerations were side-lined. This has been problematic as it fails to appreciate the complexity of sustainability, meaning that the challenges that it poses will continue to be misunderstood at best, and inappropriately addressed at worst.

Arora-Jonsson (2013) points out, sustainability, understood correctly, is about the entanglements of the social, the environmental and the economic. Interwoven as they are, one aspect cannot be set apart from the other. That is to say, regardless of their physical or temporal separation, they cannot be described independently of one another.<sup>1</sup> They are entangled in complex relationships across space and time. So, for instance, the industrial revolution, which was quite literally fuelled by the burning of coal, oil and gas, created significant environmental destruction, including climate change. Meanwhile, the social and economic implications arising from those economic activities have left an enduring legacy of inequalities, as capitalists continue to reap huge benefits and many individuals within post-industrial communities – including many rural ones – are left struggling to find meaningful employment in the 21st century.

Climate change is arguably the greatest sustainability challenge humanity has faced as it poses an existential crisis for modern societies. It is already exacerbating drought, water scarcity and flooding events; causing catastrophic storms to be more fierce and more frequent; melting polar ice and causing rising sea levels; and accelerating biodiversity decline. Many societies around the world are already struggling to adapt to its effects, and it is increasingly a driver of migration (Cattaneo *et al.*, 2019; Kaczan and Orgill-Meyer, 2020). Without rapid action across all aspects of society, the impacts of climate change are projected to intensify significantly, increasingly compounding each other and accelerating (IPCC, 2022).

This crisis can largely be attributed to the exponential rise in the release of greenhouse gas emissions<sup>2</sup> that commenced with the industrial revolution and has accelerated since. With its origins in Western Europe in the late 18th



century, the industrial revolution subsequently spread across the globe through the expansion of capitalism and the evolution of technology, which was also supported by colonialism and trading links. Increased mechanisation resulted in agrarian transformation and the urbanisation of many societies,<sup>3</sup> a process that is ongoing in some parts of the world. Globally, the main emitters of greenhouse gas emissions are, in order of greatest to least, electricity and heat generation, agriculture, transportation, manufacturing and forestry (C2ES, 2022), although this varies country-to-country. For example, in the UK, transportation is a much greater contributor than agriculture (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2019). Greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise. As a result, the earth is now at least 1.1°C warmer than it was in the late 1800s and the last decade (2011–2020) was the warmest on record (UN, ND). Based on current national climate plans, global warming is projected to reach 2.7°C by the end of the century (*ibid.*). The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is unequivocal in stating that this level of warming will spell disaster for societies worldwide (IPCC, 2022).

Mitigating this crisis will require systemic change across all facets of society, especially in the global North. Among other changes, the way we produce and consume energy, food and fibre must fundamentally transform in order to drastically reduce the amount of greenhouse gasses emitted by these activities. Generally, politicians prefer supply-side policies to combat emissions, e.g., technological innovation or green energy generation. By extension, much policy focus is contingent on rural transformation, from the installation of on-shore wind or solar farms to the implementation of carbon-neutral (or net-positive) agricultural practices to reforestation. Therefore, the way in which we govern the rural through land use, agriculture or energy policies, is directly related to climate change. In the subsequent chapters, we explore some of the policies (direct and indirect) that the government has developed to address emissions and climate change and to encourage nature recovery. In almost every chapter, climate change and its consequences are either a major or minor consideration.

Crucially, in addressing the climate crisis, it must be ensured that solutions are equitable. There are numerous inequalities that arise from climate change. They are related to demographic characteristics (gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age); assets and income; and public decision-making and access to public resources (education, housing, health) (Islam and Winkel, 2017). These social inequalities generally mean that those in poverty suffer disproportionately more from the adverse effects of climate change than the wealthy (Islam and Winkel, 2017; Colmer, 2021). Indeed, the economic transition to net-zero greenhouse gas emissions<sup>4</sup> will have fiscal implications for households, with costs and benefits passing unevenly through households (HM Treasury, 2021). Research has shown how the indirect impact of household activities on emissions is potentially huge (Patel, 2022). Therefore, many chapters in this collection explore how community action has sought to achieve social and environmental justice, thereby rectifying inequalities. We elaborate further on the chapters below using the themes of rural governance, land use and rural communities.

## Rural governance

That the rural is a social construct is well recognised by many researchers today. The rural is often understood in deficit terms, as being the counterpoint to the urban. Meanwhile, cultural depictions of the rural elevate it to something of an idyllic state. McAreavey, in Chapter 2, offers an in-depth overview of the diversity of rural places across the UK, the common issues that they share, and many of the differences. Her analysis highlights the oddity of the rural/urban distinction, revealing the many and complex interconnections. McAreavey shows how rural as a social construction obscures a deeper understanding of social issues that affect people, whether they live in a rural or urban setting. Such a viewpoint fails to fully appreciate the assets of the rural, as well as the interconnections that exist between it and the urban, and thus its wider role in advancing a more sustainable way of living. The material features of the rural, including in relation to food production, timber and other raw materials are important considerations in this regard. As this collection demonstrates, the rural encompasses this materiality and more aspects besides.

For a long time, rural areas across the UK were supported by a ring-fenced fund from the EU. Leader funding provided support for local communities to engage in community-led local development. Representing rural governance in action, it featured many aspects of governance – partnership working; autonomy and power redistribution; and shared responsibilities for getting things done. Not surprisingly then, there were very many aspects of the Leader approach to applaud, including grassroots engagement, local autonomy, and collaboration across territories. However, a form of administrative ‘gold plating’ in some of the devolved nations (McAreavey, 2022), resulted in an overly bureaucratic funding programme. It is evident then that a one-size-fits-all approach to policy will not work in a UK context. Policymakers need to appreciate the specificity of place and tailor policy interventions accordingly. Heron points out in Chapter 3, how the application of different governance architecture across the UK potentially creates challenges between reserved and devolved areas. He notes there are fears that many of the funds administered through the Levelling Up agenda will be channelled into urban communities and that they will bypass the devolved administrations. The importance of jurisdictions and administrative boundaries ought not to impede effective governance of the environment (which pays little respect to such boundaries). Heron explores in some detail the different domains of governance and how gaps and misalignments can emerge.

In this collection, as we explain below, different chapters explore community energy; connectivity; entrepreneurship; agricultural policies and environmental land management; mining; forestry; and patriarchal structures. Underpinning these is rural governance which remains an important consideration as the government rolls out its new policies outside EU membership. Of particular relevance to rural communities is the UK government’s Levelling Up policy.

The Levelling Up agenda reveals important considerations for rural governance that relate to the funds that are set to replace the Leader programme, an EU

community-led local development (CLLD) programme that provided ring-fenced funds for rural action. CLLD programme was supported since the early 1990s across the rural UK through its membership of the EU. Recognised for many different traits, particularly its grassroots engagement, ring-fenced fund and focus on innovation, the Leader programme supported many initiatives led by rural communities across the UK. There are many opportunities within the Levelling Up White Paper to further nurture locally led development, including the stated desire to allow local people to set priorities for their areas and to pilot new models of community partnership. Recent research has shown how considerations for the design of future rural community governance approaches ought to be attentive to proactive participation to ensure the widest engagement; capacity building; proportionate monitoring and evaluation and ensuring equality across partners (McAreevey, 2022). However, this would require a more decentralised approach to governance than has been evident within the Shared Prosperity Fund to date. Indeed, lobby groups have voiced concern over how rural areas will potentially be omitted from these funds (see, for instance, ACRE, 2022). The degree to which funds will be decentralised and rural areas governed in an equitable way remains to be seen.

## **Land use**

The land is the primary source of food, fibre and energy upon which our societies depend, and the biodiversity it supports underpins much life on this planet. Without sustainable land use there is no sustainable future for humanity. The central policy shaping land use practices across the EU is the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which also underpinned UK agri-environmental policies prior to its exit from the EU. The CAP's original aims were centred around achieving food security in Europe. However, original CAP policies eventually led to over-production and have been blamed for supporting the rapid expansion of environmentally damaging agricultural practices. They also distorted global markets, to the detriment of other agricultural producers globally, particularly those in the global south. In response to these challenges, the CAP has undergone significant reform in recent decades, with subsequent iterations of the policy becoming increasingly less market-distorting, more focused on environmental sustainability, and more supportive of the rural communities in which agriculture production takes place (although as chapters throughout this book argue, this transition has been far from perfect). The idea of agriculture as 'multifunctional' – delivering not only food and fibre, but a range of other public goods – has become central.

Now outside the EU, the UK is no longer legally required to adhere to CAP regulations. Although a degree of regulatory alignment with the EU will likely continue to be necessary, the UK government<sup>5</sup> is set to shift policy focus nearly entirely to the delivery of environmental outcomes, with farmers and other land managers to be rewarded for the provision of public goods. The replacement of the CAP is a major development for rural land use in the UK, one which may foment

change elsewhere in Europe and beyond as lessons are learned from the process as it plays out here.

In Chapter 4, Little, Lyon and Tsouvalis explore the new ways the UK government is encouraging and supporting land managers to farm more 'sustainably'. Although many view these changes as positive for the natural environment – which is, undoubtedly, important – it is clear that this policy shift means that agri-environmental policy in the UK (or, at least, England and Wales) will focus on a narrow definition of sustainability as pertaining to 'the environment' only, while the social and economic concerns of the rural communities in which agriculture takes place are increasingly side-lined.

Moreover, as Attorp and Hubbard argue in Chapter 5, a focus on environmental outcomes only may actually have the negative effect of 'off-shoring' many of the UK's negative environmental externalities to third-country producers. Meanwhile, at a broader food system level, the tendency to give primacy to economic concerns undermines environmental and social outcomes. They detail how power distributions within the food system, both in the UK and beyond, shape what elements of 'sustainability' are prioritised, and which are overlooked. As is argued throughout this book, unless sustainability is considered in its totality, as a complex set of interwoven environmental, social and economic factors then policies will fail to achieve truly sustainable outcomes. Attorp and Hubbard also highlight how, post-Brexit, the UK's devolved nations do not necessarily share the same vision for the future direction of their agri-food sectors, nor do their goals align with the UK government's post-Brexit vision of the country as a liberal, free-market player on the international trade stage. This presents significant challenges for the development of future agri-environmental policies in the UK.

Although, for decades, much of the discourse on rural land use policy in the UK and EU has been concerned primarily with agriculture, rural land is, of course, utilised in many other ways. In Chapter 6, Cirefice *et al.* consider the complexities inherent in governing resources generated in and extracted from rural regions. They discuss the political context of extractivism, in the form of mining in the UK and Ireland, and community resistance to it. Drawing on scholarship and activism from the Global South, they discuss how Brexit may turn Northern Ireland into a 'rural sacrifice zone' and environmental blind-spot. They highlight the case of a gold mine in Northern Ireland's Sperrin Mountains and use an environmental justice lens to critique the ways in which policies that enable and support extractivism threaten ecological and social sustainability in rural Northern Ireland.

As the climate and biodiversity crises deepen, increased focus is being placed on how they can be addressed through (rurally based) initiatives such as increasing biodiversity and drawing down carbon through afforestation, or by meeting our energy needs via renewable sources such as wind and solar. Many of these changes have significant implications for rural regions.

Wynne Jones *et al.* (Chapter 7) discuss the current drive to expand forests in the UK. They highlight difficulties inherent in determining just how much land should be re-forested, how, and at what rate. For example, significantly increasing

forested areas logically decreases land available for agriculture, thereby resulting in loss of employment in the agriculture sector, and possibly, loss of agricultural community identity, places, and products. There are also potential tensions created by the rapid rate of post-Brexit policy changes, which prioritise short-term carbon sequestration goals over much else. They argue for slower, more 'durable and adaptable approaches' to forest policy-making that account for the needs of rural communities and for the 'slow', ecological complexity of forests.

The need to transition to renewable energy sources such as wind and solar also brings into question the ways the rural economy and rural communities more broadly are affected by an increased utilisation of renewable resources. In Chapter 8, Clausen and Rudolph shed light on how the interplay between renewable energy and rural areas has been governed in the UK, discuss to what extent this relationship has been shaped by EU policies and programmes, and reflect on how Brexit may impact recent policies and trends towards rural energy transition. They place particular focus on community-based renewable energy initiatives, using examples from peripheral regions in the UK to critique whether the current renewable energy transition is truly sustainable in all senses of the term. While this transformation in the energy sector has opened up new potential for rural development, it has brought to the fore contestations about how the utilisation, control and profits from renewable energy are negotiated.

## **Rural communities**

Rural communities are, of course, fundamentally shaped by the way that rural land is 'used', whether that be for food and fibre production, mineral extraction, energy generation or biodiversity and carbon sequestration. However, as Heron and McAreavey argue in Chapters 2 and 3, it is an error to limit analysis of rural communities to the types of land use that underpin them, or to consider rural regions as diametrically opposed to urban ones. Chapters in the final section of this book take a broader look at challenges facing and shaping rural communities, many of which are shared by urban communities. They all argue, in different ways, that because policies typically fail to consider the ways in which rural communities and urban communities are the 'same but different', the specific needs of rural regions are often insufficiently addressed. Brexit presents an opportunity to effectively remedy this policy weakness.

In today's hyper-connected world, broadband and digital services are typically taken for granted by urban dwellers – a part of urban infrastructure that most people can hardly conceive of going without. But in many rural regions, access to these services remains patchy at best, and rural development is being held back as a result. Therefore, access to broadband and digital services has become a priority for rural communities. In Chapter 9, Gerli and Whalley discuss new policymaking scenarios in rural broadband and digital services that have opened now that the UK is no longer subject to the EU regulatory framework that has thus far driven rural digitisation. One advantage is that there may be opportunities to better support community broadband networks and other small providers who, so far,

have struggled to benefit from public subsidies despite their proven contribution to reducing the rural-urban digital divide in the UK. On the other hand, leaving the EU could expose the UK's rural economies to new risks and challenges, especially if no regulatory interventions are put in place to mitigate market distortions in the development and provision of digital technologies. This clearly demonstrates how a 'one size fits all' policy can fail to adequately address rural challenges, thereby undermining rural sustainability.

Within the past century, many milestones have been reached in the pursuit of gender equality, and the EU has been a key driver of gender equality in the Member States. However, persistent inequalities between men and women remain, particularly in remote rural settings. To understand why this is the case, in Chapter 10, Budge and Shortall consider a case study from the Shetland Islands: Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa, a traditional (and very masculine) Viking fire festival that celebrates the end of the winter's long, dark nights<sup>6</sup>. They explore themes including men's mental health, community cohesion, tradition and how women's exclusion is justified. They also consider how the debate in Shetland reflects wider social patterns across the UK and the EU, particularly focusing on polarisation and the potential impact of patriarchal structures on the future sustainability of rural communities, including in post-Brexit UK.

In this book's final chapter on the sub-theme of rural communities (Chapter 11), Steiner *et al.* consider the challenges and opportunities facing rural social enterprises as EU sources of funding and support for them are replaced (or not) post-Brexit. They discuss their experiences of being a part of an EU-funded project called Older People for Older People (O4O), which worked to address the service needs of older people in rural regions in Scotland. Drawing on lessons learnt from this project, they discuss the potential consequences of Brexit on rural social entrepreneurship. They argue that EU funding has played an important role in facilitating rural social entrepreneurship, and question whether Brexit may undermine such initiatives in the future, particularly in peripheral rural communities.

Keith Halfacree provides much food for thought as he wraps everything up in the final chapter. He very wisely points out how uncertainty underpins much of what is written in this book. Our future is always uncertain, but that uncertainty has been elevated during the past five years for the reasons already outlined – Brexit, Covid-19 and, more recently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine. And while the exit of the UK from the EU offers opportunities to do things better, early signs are not quite encouraging, with the emergence of a less-than-ambitious range of new policies impacting on the rural. However, he shows, somewhat paradoxically (given Brexit and Covid-19), how 'alive' the rural actually is in 2022, a reality that is implicitly underpinned in this collection.

## Notes

1 Here we also borrow from quantum mechanics to help illustrate the complex and temporal nature of the relationship (see Jackson, 2017).

- 2 The increased emission of greenhouse gases trap heat which results in rising temperatures.
- 3 Of course, the industrial revolution had many complexities, causes and effects, but in the interests of illustrating the multifarious relations of sustainability, we have presented a simplified overview.
- 4 Net zero refers to a state in which the greenhouse gases going into the atmosphere are balanced by removal out of the atmosphere
- 5 Although not all UK nations are set to take the same approach, as is discussed in Chapter 5.
- 6 Just before this volume went to press, the festival organisers announced that they were lifting the ban on female participants, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jun/22/shetlands-largest-up-helly-aa-lifts-ban-on-female-participants>

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## 2 What is the rural?

*Ruth McAreavey*

### **Introduction**

The global pandemic thrust rural areas onto the centre stage, highlighting perceived safety from the virus due to lower population density and lower social contact overall. This, even though, in the western world most people live in an urban context: according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2018), just over a quarter of the OECD population lives in a predominantly rural region and among these, 80 percent live close to a city. This chapter shows that, not only does the proportion of the population living in a rural area differ across the UK, but that those rural regions also differ significantly in terms of physical remoteness or proximity to urban centres; in relation to land use and natural resources; and according to housing and settlement patterns. The bottom line is that UK rural areas are incredibly diverse, suggesting that rural sustainability is also complex.

Although there have been significant transitions over recent decades in rural policy and how the rural is governed, rural does not hold the same meaning in Northern Ireland as it does in the south of England or the Highlands of Scotland or the Welsh valleys. Even within England, rurality differs greatly. According to the OECD (2018), there are three types of rural areas: rural inside a functional urban area, rural close to cities and remote rural. The northern Dales is quite distinct from that of the Cotswolds; some rural communities are highly gentrified, e.g., Rutland, while others are much less so, e.g., ex-mining villages in county Durham. England has no remote areas, as classified by the OECD (2018), as they are all relatively proximate to urban areas. This contrasts with Scotland where remoteness is an issue for many rural places, such as island or fragile upland communities.

These technical definitions conceal deeper cultural constructions of rurality that prevail across the UK. Particular notions of the idyllic rural prevail, especially in England. The resolute values of rural life that combine ideas about community and nationhood with an aversion to the welfare state have long been recognised in rural England (Woodward, 1996). And yet there is a tendency to group rural areas as a homogenous whole, a hangover from the pre-industrial era when rural was much more closely aligned to primary industries, especially

agriculture (Shortall and Warner, 2012). In a post-industrial context, urban–rural distinctions are much less clear cut, leading Hoggart (1990), over 30 years ago, to provocatively suggest ‘Let’s do away with the rural.’ Referring to the way that the categorisation of rural impedes our understanding of issues that transcend rural–urban boundaries, Hoggart wished to point out how rural is not causal to significant social processes and so it makes little theoretical sense to bundle rural areas together in an undifferentiated way.

Contemporary research since Hoggart’s call to action has revealed distinctiveness across different rural contexts and yet generalised perceptions of a uniform rural continues to exist, evident in popular culture, often typified as the ‘rural idyll’. The rural idyll elides poverty and hardship that certainly exists in some rural places and spaces (Milbourne, 2004; Shucksmith, 2000; Shucksmith *et al.*, 2021), it also reinforces uneven power relations. What it means to be rural across different parts of the UK is quite different. One of the aims of this collection is to identify the differentiated nature of rural areas within the UK, the implications for land use and the sustainability of rural areas.

The chapter proceeds by examining rurality across the UK through three different perspectives. Firstly, the use of definitions and population figures shows considerable diversity across the rural UK. Secondly, in scrutinising social constructions of rurality, the chapter brings to the fore the narrative of elites in society in advancing particular interests. Finally, different types of land-use across the UK highlight the transformations that have been evident in rural policy for over 30 years, as conservation objectives have been promoted in public policy, at the same time rural areas have transformed from primary sites of production (mostly of private goods) to places of consumption with production extending to the creation of public goods. The chapter concludes by considering the implications of these different standpoints for sustainability and the future of rural UK outside the EU.

### **Definitions, statistics and rurality**

Policymakers employ many different tools to define rural. Traditionally, they were classified according to population figures, and while that measurement continues to be used, increasingly, the limitations of measuring only population density are recognised. Thus, access to adjacent populations is sometimes considered in recognition of urban-rural linkages and to recognise remoteness. Increasingly, there has been a shift towards ‘population potential’, allowing for the distance that individuals live from other places, including urban areas (Gløersen *et al.*, 2006). Accounting for urban-rural interconnections in this way recognises how rural areas are not set apart from their urban counterparts but are inextricably interlinked. In England, the 2021 Census recognises ten different categories, of which four are urban and six are rural. English local authorities are thus recognised as being predominantly rural, urban with significant rural and predominantly urban (DEFRA, 2021b). Northern Ireland follows a model that recognises rural areas as those with settlements of under 5,000 people. It has an additional metric

that measures drive time to a centre of 10,000 or more that offers a range of services. The consequence of this is that approximately 93 percent of its population live within 30 minutes' drive time of the town centre of a settlement containing a population of at least 10,000 (NISRA, 2015), with closer proximity for all residents to small-town settlements. Over one-third of the population in Northern Ireland lives in a rural area (NISRA, 2015). Meanwhile, in Scotland, where rural areas are defined as communities with fewer than 3,000 people, they comprise 98 percent of the land mass and include 17 percent of Scotland's population (National Statistics for Scotland, 2021). With 70 percent of Scottish rural areas being more than 30 minutes' drive time from a settlement of 10,000 or more, they are considered remote (Atterton and McCracken, 2021). A variety of measurements is used in Wales, including sparsity and encompassing four groups – large towns in less sparse context; small towns in less sparse context; others in less sparse context; and all settlements in the sparsest context (Statistics for Wales, 2008). Most of the population in the latter live in villages and smaller settlements.

Like many modern economies, the UK is an ageing one. This is amplified in a rural context, with UK rural areas generally having an older population than their urban counterparts. For instance, rural Scotland has a lower proportion of the population in the age range 16–44 but a higher proportion of people aged 45 and over (National Statistics for Scotland, 2021). Large pockets of the elderly population are found within Welsh rural local authorities including Conwy, Denbighshire, Powys, Pembrokeshire and South Carmarthenshire. Apart from Powys, these pockets are found near the Welsh coastline (Wales Rural Observatory, n.d.). Snapshots of population profiles can hide wider patterns. In Wales, the number of people aged 16–24 living in rural authorities has returned to its 1991 levels. In Northern Ireland, rural population growth is outstripping that of urban areas – between 2001 and 2018 rural growth was 16 percent as compared to 6 percent in urban areas. Most of this growth was in rural areas close to urban centres. Seventeen percent of England's population live in rural areas (9.6 million), this being an increase from 9.1 million in 2011, although it marks a reduction in the proportion of rural residents from 17.2 percent to 17.1 percent (DEFRA, 2021a).

Demographic profiles have clear implications for appropriate policy interventions and also for the wider sustainability of rural areas. Research suggests that young people leave rural areas because of poor housing and public transport and due to better higher education and employment opportunities elsewhere (North Yorkshire Rural Commission, 2021; Williams and Doyle, 2018). For example, it is estimated that if North Yorkshire had the same percentage of younger adults as the national figure, there would be 45,551 additional younger working-age adults living in the County (North Yorkshire Rural Commission, 2021). This missing generation impacts on the vibrancy and sustainability of the area, creating a significant hole in the economy at approximately £1.5 billion per year (*ibid*).

## Locality, deprivation and wellbeing

Rural poverty is manifest in quite particular ways. Poor access to employment opportunities and public services, lack of affordable housing and poor housing stock can contribute to rural poverty (21 percent of English rural homes are energy inefficient compared to 3 percent in urban areas [Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2021]). While very few areas with the highest concentration of deprivation are in rural locations (Williams and Doyle, 2018), some rural areas are disadvantaged. It is often masked by affluence and a culture of self-reliance, but to fully understand it, the specificity of place must be examined. In county Durham in the North East of England, the Bishop Auckland and Shildon (BASH) Area Action Partnership has the highest intensity of deprivation despite showing relative improvement. Around a quarter of this locality's population (24.9 percent) are living with low income (as compared to 14.6 percent in England, and 17.8 percent in County Durham (Durham County Council, 2022)). The particular post-industrial heritage of many rural communities in the North East of England poses unique challenges, reflecting the importance of understanding the specificity of place. Many villages in the region are not what might be expected in an English setting. Senior (n.d.) describes it well, explaining how they were 'not villages in a meaningful sense of the term, but long, straight terraces of mean industrial housing strung along highways or packed close together in grid-iron blocks, like patches of Manchester slum set down on open moors and hillside.' These so-called colliery rows characterised many mining villages. With the closure of the pits and the steel industry during the 20th century, there has been no replacement employment. Evidently, the challenges in these rural villages are not the same as those faced by remote communities in the Scottish Highlands. Here challenges include persistent depopulation, changes to the rural economy, and the corresponding economic 'live-ability' of rural life (Scottish Government, 2020a), as expressed by the Federation of Small Businesses, Scotland:

perhaps the overriding concern for island and remote rural communities is their economic viability, based on the lack of younger/family residents (and therefore available workforce) in the area.

(Federation of Small Businesses Scotland,  
cited in Scottish Government, 2020a)

Despite powerful messages communicated about rural poverty, rural areas in the UK are generally considered by rural residents to be more desirable places to live according to measures of wellbeing and crime. Overall, self-reported wellbeing, safety and quality of life more generally tend to be higher in rural areas (ONS, 2019). In Northern Ireland, self-reported high personal happiness is higher in all rural areas (43 percent) compared to urban areas (DAERA, 2020). In Scotland, 95 percent of remote rural residents feel 'very safe' as compared to 88 percent in accessible rural areas and 83 percent in the rest of Scotland (National Statistics

Scotland, 2021). People living in remote Scottish rural areas are more likely to describe their neighbourhood as a 'very good' place to live (80 percent), compared to accessible rural areas (70 percent) and the rest of Scotland (54 percent) (National Statistics Scotland, 2021).

### **Rurality and diversity**

Although rural economies are much more diverse than the traditional view of rural as equating to agriculture, it is still true that most food production takes place in rural areas. Due to the fundamental restructuring of food systems, including increased reliance on a flexible and cheap workforce that is largely supplied by immigrants, rural immigration has a major impact on food systems. This has been felt at the very local level with profound impacts on diversity and on agri-food systems. As a result, pockets of eastern European nationals are found in different parts of rural UK including Lincolnshire, rural North Wales, county Armagh and rural Aberdeenshire, reflecting their employment in fish and meat processing, horticulture and agriculture (Doyle and McAreavey, 2016; Lever and Milbourne, 2017; Migration Yorkshire, 2021; Shubin and Dickey, 2013). Northern Ireland provides an excellent example of how pockets of migrants have settled across rural space. Between 2001 and 2011 the proportion of the population that was born outside the UK and Ireland rose from 1.5 percent to 4.5 percent (NISRA, 2013). This is spatially varied, with some rural wards having upwards of 10 percent of non-UK/Ireland migrants, including areas in the counties of Tyrone and Armagh (Doyle and McAreavey, 2016).

In general, urban areas are more ethnically diverse than their rural counterparts. In 2020, the 'white ethnic' group accounted for 96.8 percent of the rural population, compared with 81.7 percent in urban areas (DEFRA, 2021c). Thus, in many rural places, ethnic diversity is not necessarily visible. The literature explains how whiteness can 'protect' against outright racism and discrimination (Garland and Chakraborti, 2006; Halej, 2014). Mackrell and Pemberton (2018: 54) describe how their research respondents felt 'lucky' to be white as it reduced their vulnerability and prospects of facing discrimination, supporting their inclusion in everyday life. This reflects the fact that most migrants wish to belong rather than remain solely within a static social group, often with essentialised identity (Probyn, 1996). However, it raises some tricky questions about inclusion and diversity as it suggests the superiority of whiteness and the perpetuation of deep-seated discriminatory attitudes and behaviour.

### **Constructing rural**

Statistics provide a particular picture of rural areas in the UK. They are also used by policymakers to construct definitions and to categorise rural communities as a means of determining how resources are allocated. Policy is also influenced by powerful interest groups, public debate and cultural values and so the meaning attached to 'rural' is an important consideration

in how the countryside should be used. For that reason, understanding the social construction of rurality is important if we are to fully comprehend the complexity of relations that emerge between rural stakeholders and how rural sustainability is navigated.

Mention of the word 'rural' conjures images based on stereotypes of a backward, homogenous society. This can reinforce prejudiced ideas about who the countryside is for. These barriers are only starting to be understood through initiatives such as 'Walking Together',<sup>1</sup> depicted in Figure 2.1.

Complex barriers that are, as yet, not fully understood, often prevent BAME, refugee and migrant communities from fully accessing and enjoying the countryside. However, during the pandemic, there was a notable rise in visitors from BAME communities (93 percent white visitors in 2020 to Cumbria compared with 96/7 percent usually, Cumbria Tourism 2020).

At this time, rural space became associated with safety and tranquillity, and this was reflected in a 'move to the countryside', as some urban dwellers sought permanent sanctuary away from a noisy urban setting, placing pressure on an already over-heated housing market. A 2021 Rural Property Report (Coulter's Property, 2021) reveals that rural property price had a 3.3 percent higher increase than in urban areas. Harborough saw the largest increase in rural property prices, with an increase of over 33.6 percent over the past five years. Romanticised notions of the rural idyll and a near utopian way of life within English society go back 500 years (Goodwin-Hawkins, 2015) and is closely aligned with constructions



Figure 2.1 'Walking together': Walk with refugees at Hadrian's Wall, Northumberland. Image: © Arto Polus.

of Englishness and cultural norms (Agyeman and Spooner, 1997; Neal, 2002). During the industrial revolution, Victorian philanthropists advanced the idea of getting out of gritty, dirty and sooty cities into the clean, green and pleasant countryside. Distinctive landscapes offered respite for urban factory workers and were important in influencing the meaning of rurality in England, be that the Lake District of the north west or the North Yorkshire moors. They provided inspiration for many poets and writers including Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake. At this time, society was becoming more urbanised and social commentators were drawing attention to the loss of close social ties (cf. Tonnies conceptualisation of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*). In so doing they failed to fully appreciate that our view of tradition is a product of modernity. Emotions, especially nostalgia, underpin both rural and urban constructions of the rural identity, where the past is given 'special qualities' (Davis, 1979, 13 in Bennett, 2009) and assumes heightened significance because it is juxtaposed with present feeling (Bennett, 2009). Emotional framings of the rural often give rise to a perception of higher levels of deprivation compared to urban areas, but, as already indicated, urban poverty is much more prevalent.

Contrasting images of the urban and the rural have been made real over centuries, evident in literature and the arts, through depictions by poets, writers and illustrators. Many of the ideas about the British countryside, particularly the rural idyll, have been dominated by an urban-based nostalgia (Askins, 2009; Bunce, 1994), often formed by middle-class elites who seek to preserve and enhance their property values and who also perceive the rural as being under threat (Hall *et al.*, 1973; Woods, 2005). Industrial rural areas such as mining communities of the north east and the south west of England are less often evoked. These places have a strong sense of identity that is distinct from the rural idyll but is replete with symbolic markers such as brass bands and lodge banners (cf. Brown, 1987), albeit that collective identity is a coping mechanism in the face of ongoing change and is strongly influenced by nostalgic reflections of a bygone era (Bennett, 2009). The popularity of television programmes promoting an idealised image of the countryside attests to this fact (Eriksson, 2009; Horton, 2008). Popular notions of rurality tend to fix rural in time and space, as bounded and sedentary, as if within a container, often emphasising its parochial nature in contrast to the mobile, heterogeneous and cosmopolitan urban (Cresswell, 2006; Goodwin-Hawkins, 2015). This fails to recognise the role and significance of the 'global countryside' (Woods, 2007), it obscures diversity and it overlooks constellations of the rural that are evident across the UK.

The universality of the English rural idyll has also been challenged outside the UK. For example, Gkartzios and Remoundou (2018) show how in Greece the urban-rural divide does not exist in the same way as in the UK as people have had hybrid urban-rural identities. Furthermore, reference has been made to the fact that rather than a rural paradise, a rural hell existed due to the harsh living conditions in Greek villages (Meraklis, 1987 in Gkartzios and Remoundou, 2018). Similarly, the abject poverty of rural life in Romania came to light as a result of the mass exodus of its population (Paun, 2018).

Accelerated levels of transnational mobility across rural spaces, as indicated in the previous section, mean that rural areas are anything but fixed and many are accepting, welcoming even, of difference (Bell and Osti, 2010; McAreavey and Argent, 2018). Rural cosmopolitanism has been found to exist within rural communities, many of which had little previous experience of immigration, marked by a distinct rural condition of limited public space, limited residential segregation, and a collective interest in sustaining the community (Woods, 2018). Under the right circumstances, rural cosmopolitanism creates conditions that allow rural communities to nurture the incorporation of newcomers to rural places (Krivokapic-Skoko *et al.*, 2018; Stenbacka, 2018; Woods, 2018). Krivokapic-Skoko and colleagues observe how ‘translocal and transnational pathways open up the rural to global forces thus contradicting the commonplace imaginary that the rural is a static, backward space’ (2018: 155). Global processes are thus evident in rural areas and may be manifest in different ways according to the local context (Sherry and Shortall, 2009; Woods, 2007). Goodwin-Hawkins convincingly argues that ‘mobilities are continual through time and intrinsic to place...rural places are intrinsically never still’ (2015: 176–177). As a result, the specificity of place is important for understanding how different rural places have different processes of mobility (Goodwin-Hawkins, 2015).

### **Governance of rural areas**

Contestations over land use (see also Heron, this volume) stimulate critical debates as different interest groups have diverging interests on how the countryside should be used. For a long time, rural was associated with primary production, particularly agriculture. Land ownership meant the ability to assert property rights and produce private goods, typically food products. During the nearly 40 years of EU membership, the UK’s rural policies were largely driven by the European agenda which instilled disadvantage in rural. Rural no longer equated to agriculture, instead encompassing wider aspects and reflecting a territorial rather than a fully sectoral approach to policy. Particularly with environmental concerns emerging in the late 1980s (crystallised in the Brundtland Commission, 1987), landowners were under pressure to act with longer-term interests in mind, taking care to pay attention to social, economic and environmental considerations and thus contributing to a wide sustainability agenda. The transformation of European rural policy and a wider association of rural to encompass activities within a territory was articulated during the late 1990s in the European Commission’s Cork declaration that recognised the multifunctional role of agriculture. Moreover, it placed agriculture at the interface between people and the environment with farmers assuming a countryside stewardship role (Gorman *et al.*, 2001). The multi-functional countryside can be a place of production, consumption and preservation as it fulfils demands of residents; landowners and farmers; rural businesses; conservationists; and environmentalists.

On the ground this has resulted in a funding stream linking agriculture to rural, shifting the policy from one that is sectoral to a territorial approach. Rural became



a way to talk about places (not only in relation to agriculture or forestry). Across the UK, there are separate departments/ministers for the economy more widely. Rural affairs and agriculture typically go hand-in-hand, sometimes together and often are grouped with the environment, but set apart from 'mainstream' economy. This is reflective of the exceptional position of agriculture in the policy process and means that achieving sustainable rural policy outcomes may be challenged as priorities are skewed according to what department is driving the policy agenda. Nearly 20 years ago England's Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) transitioned into the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Similarly, the Department of Agriculture in Northern Ireland became the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development before transitioning to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) in 2016 (DAERA, 2016). Agriculture and rural issues are under the remit of one of over 40 directorates in Scotland, the Scottish Agriculture and Rural Economy Directorate and in Wales the Minister for Rural Affairs. While rural became part of the new branding, responsible departments were not always sure what to do with it.

Since EU exit, the UK approach has fragmented in the transition to a new agricultural policy framework. These shifts in rural governance have very real consequences for the framing and implementation of rural policy, with evidence of tension between agricultural and environmental interests, as demonstrated in emerging policy in England and Northern Ireland. In England, agricultural policy is very closely aligned to the environment with an Environmental Land Management approach forming a key element of the new policy framework as outlined in Chapter 4. In contrast, in Northern Ireland, the government has been accused of favouring farming and the economy over the environment. The two priorities of agricultural policy in Northern Ireland are that of increasing agricultural productivity alongside protecting and enhancing the natural environment, including supporting sustainable practices. The tension between the environment and agriculture is palpable: two different Climate Change Bills were brought to the Northern Ireland Executive for consideration, one introduced by the Green Party as a private member's bill aiming for net zero by 2045 and the other introduced by DAERA calling for an 82 percent reduction in greenhouse gases by 2050. The DAERA minister has indicated that aiming for net zero would be devastating for the farming community (Coyne, 2021). How these seemingly conflicting interests are resolved is very indicative of the real tensions that emerge when the different pillars of sustainability – social, economic and environment, intertwine. Negotiating between different interests will have important implications for rural economies across the UK.

### **Agri-food, forestry and land ownership**

Agriculture remains important to rural economies, but its form differs across the UK (see also Attorp and Hubbard in this volume). Large-scale agri-businesses are prevalent across East Anglia, smaller family farms in Northern Ireland and larger tenant farms in parts of Scotland and England. Average farm size in Wales

is 48ha, 107ha in Scotland, 40ha in Northern Ireland and 87 ha in England (Armstrong, 2016; DAERA, 2020; DEFRA, 2021b; Scottish Government, 2020b). However, these averages, particularly those for Scotland, do not reveal how farm size distribution differs within regions. Average size holdings in Scotland away from the east coast and the central belt are over 200 ha, but a high proportion of holdings on the north-west coast are less than 20 ha.

Just over half of Scotland's agricultural land is comprised of rough grazing (Scottish Government, 2014). Wales, meanwhile, characterised by upland and mountainous areas has a much wetter climate than the rest of the UK and much of the land is marginal, classified as 'less favourable area' (LFA) land. In 2015, 88 percent of the land was used for agriculture, accounting for 4 percent of regional employment, a figure that is higher than the UK average (Armstrong, 2016). For example, agriculture employs approximately 2.5 percent of the working population in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2019b). Meanwhile, Northern Ireland has the largest proportion of the working population employed in agriculture, accounting for 5.8 percent (DAERA, 2020).

Multifunctionality in agriculture recognises the different outputs created by agriculture and refers to the wider benefits beyond private goods (typically food production) to recognise the creation of non-commodity goods such as cultural heritage, landscape, and ecosystem services. Equally, woodlands are also valued for their multifunctionality as articulated in a Scottish Parliament publication on woodlands: 'The way we own and use land is central to big public policy challenges including climate action, productivity, and inclusive growth' (Yang, 2020). In this way, a range of different interest groups have a legitimate voice in determining what land, and thus the countryside, is used for. This creates serious challenges for devising and implementing sustainable policies as it requires juggling between different interests and can often result in unequal outcomes as some groups are more powerful than others.

There are plans to increase woodland cover across the UK to 17–19 percent as part of the goal of reaching net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 (Woodland Trust, 2020). Currently in Scotland forestry already forms a large component of the Scottish rural economy, covering 18.5 percent of land area. It contributes an estimated £1billion GVA to the Scottish economy, employing over 25,000 people in forestry and timber processing and forest recreation and tourism. Forestry is considered a key player in helping Scotland reach net-zero greenhouse gas emissions and to addressing biodiversity declines (Yang, 2020). It therefore assumes a multifunctional land-use role in not only providing private goods in the form of timber, but delivering public goods as described in Scotland's Forestry Strategy:

Scotland's forests and woodlands are an important resource of natural capital providing us with a range of environmental benefits which contribute to improvements in people's quality of life such as clear air, water, timber and renewable energy... forests and woodlands help mitigate the impact of climate change by absorbing substantial amounts of carbon.

(Scottish Government, 2019a,)

Ownership of Scottish woodlands (68 percent privately owned) reflects wider patterns of ownership concentrated in the hands of a few – 432 private landowners own 50 percent of private land in rural Scotland (Land Reform Review, 2014). The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 aims to balance public and private interests, encouraging a more diverse pattern of land ownership, including opportunities for local communities to have land-based assets that will contribute to the community's wellbeing. It notes that landowners are stewards for future generations, this recognising that land ownership does not bestow the right to act independently of wider societal wishes. This multifunctional role of land and landowners is clearly spelled out: 'Acting as the stewards of Scotland's land resource for future generations they contribute to sustainable growth and a modern, successful country' (Scottish Government, 2017).

As stewards of the countryside, landowners are encouraged to manage land in ways that are sensitive to biodiversity, the landscape and to natural resources more generally. This is a classic case of government intervention where the markets are understood to have failed—unwanted products such as pollution or other forms of environmental degradation are internalised, that is, taken into market transactions and accounted for. Positive land management is seen to deliver public goods and many benefits that align with Sustainable Development Goals, helping with carbon sequestration, biodiversity, water purification and natural resource management. Multifunctional agriculture clearly reconnects agriculture with society, creating more transparency and opening up public debate; it limits the definition of land ownership; and it places pressure on those who are using the land, in whatever capacity, to act in a more socially and environmentally responsible way.

However, it is not all good news. As power relations are negotiated in the creation of sustainable and multifunctional agriculture, particular interests may be advanced at the expense of others. This is an age-old problem associated with sustainable development: how to reconcile different interests and achieve the desired economic, social and environmental outcomes. This is evident in the UK today through DEFRA's Environmental Land Management System (ELMS) that prioritises the creation of public goods over private enterprise. This initiative rewards actions to protect the environment and has emerged in the wake of the UK's exit from the EU so that public money is made available for public goods, representing a shift away from CAP-style payments (see also Attorp and Hubbard and Little, Lyon and Tsouvalis, in this volume). Although ELMS is in its early days, it appears to sideline food production, raising questions about food security (Dobbs, 2022), but also illustrates very clearly how sustainability may be understood differently, depending on individual politics and the perspective taken. It would seem that according to the viewpoint of the English government, the English countryside is understood to offer nature-based solutions to climate change, marking a shift away from its role primarily for food production. More widely across the UK, the perceived potential of rural areas to meet environmental targets is very high and devolved governments have latched onto

the importance of nature-based solutions. Some have wryly pointed out that too much weight has been given to these so that activities such as planting trees are seen as a 'silver bullet' for negating the impact of climate change (Holl and Brancalion, 2020; Seymour, 2020).

### **Sustainable food systems**

According to the Food and Drink Federation (2021), from before the farm all the way to 'the fork', the UK industry contributes over £120bn to the economy and employs 4.1 million people, roughly 13 percent of the workforce. This has of course regional significance, for example, in Northern Ireland where 113,000 jobs are supported by the sector, the economy is three times more reliant on the food and drink industry in Gross Value Added Terms than the UK overall (Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association, 2021). As already discussed, across the UK, the sector has in the past relied heavily on EU citizens, including those who are settled in the UK and seasonal workers. The Migration Advisory Committee (2018) shows that 99 percent of seasonal agricultural workers are from EU countries. Unsurprisingly, since the UK left the EU there have been notable labour shortages in the agri-food sector and this has been exacerbated by the global pandemic which limited the ability of workers to travel for short-term work. It is estimated that around 1.3 million foreign-born workers left the UK during the pandemic, many of whom work in the food and farming sector (NFU, 2021). Overall there is estimated to be a shortfall of 500,000 people across the food and farming sector (Food and Drink Federation, 2021) and this has had real implications for the sector with unpicked harvests in 2021 and planned reduction in production for 2022 (McAreavey *et al.*, 2022; NFU, 2021) To counter some of the shortfalls, among other measures, the UK government created a seasonal worker pilot scheme, launched in 2019 with capacity since increased to 30,000 workers in 2021. This is clearly insufficient to meet the demand for flexible labour and the shortages in the agri-food sector created a major headache for retailers with images of empty food shelves in supermarkets commonplace across the UK in 2021. About half of the six million EU settlement scheme holders working predominantly in the agri-food system have temporary residence, suggesting progressive labour shortages over the next five years. Not only does this show how rural areas are conduits of global processes, but it raises existential questions about the sustainability of the food system in the UK.

### **Planning and housing**

The planning regime is a powerful tool that can control the environment, creating rules in relation to land use and influencing rural sustainability. It operates in the public interest and mediates between different stakeholders across different scales, be it local or national according to social, economic and environmental considerations, both now and for future generations. Just as questions

of sustainable development are political, complicated and complex, so too are planning processes. Along with education and health, planning and housing have been devolved in the UK since 1999 (McKee *et al.*, 2017). Settlement patterns illustrate diverse approaches to how land is used for housing across the UK and are reflective of highly politicised processes. Indeed, cogent arguments have asserted that there is no such thing as a UK housing experience, instead advocating a policy approach that is more 'spatially-aware' (McKee *et al.*, 2017). Probably housing is one of the most contentious issues in modern UK society as new developments in both rural and urban contexts attract resistance from local residents and environmental groups. Housing plays an important role in sustaining thriving rural communities (Gkartzios and Ziebarth, 2016).

Unlike their urban counterparts, planners in Northern Ireland for a long time did not always appreciate the connection between housing and wider rural development, viewing housing as a sectoral issue. The prevailing planning approach in Northern Ireland during the latter decades of the 20th century was one in favour of development. Consequently, the interconnections between economic, social and environmental concerns were frequently overlooked (Murray and Greer, 2000; Scott and Murray, 2009). The Planning Reform Order (NI) 2006 sought to overcome recognised shortcomings by transforming the planning including placing a statutory duty on planners to contribute to the delivery of sustainable development. From 2015 planning responsibilities were shifted to local councils, enacted through the Planning Act (NI) 2011 and bringing the Northern Ireland system closer to the English planning process. Even so, the legacy of a regime in favour of development prevails and the countryside is peppered with single dwellings, so-called 'ribbon' development. This has been found to nurture strong locality bonds that are built around family and friends (Murray, 2010) and it means that Northern Ireland effectively functions as a collection of small towns that is connected by larger towns (McAreavey, 2021). The challenges of rural housing are multidimensional and include issues of housing quality and conditions; retention of dwellings (through refurbishment of empty homes); and the provision of new homes in villages and outside settlements (Northern Ireland Housing Executive, 2006; Scott and Murray, 2009).

The settlement pattern found in Northern Ireland sits in sharp contrast to English villages where conservation is favoured and strict planning laws govern growth and development (Gkartzios and Shucksmith, 2015). In general, housing in England can only be built in a rural context where it is integrated within local development plans and even then, small-scale rural housing projects are realised through exceptions policies. The emphasis on preservation has curtailed housing supply and ultimately led to affordability problems in rural England with negative implications for economic sustainability. The OECD (2011b) has noted that England is the only country in Europe where it is more expensive to live in rural, rather than urban, areas. It is, therefore, exceptional, and it is important to avoid conflating the English experience with that of the UK overall. Planning traditions and policies result in distinct landscapes of contained villages in the English context and of ribbon development in Northern Ireland, depicted in images two and three (Figures 2.2 and 2.3).



Figure 2.2 Ribbon development along Ayallogue road (Northern Ireland). Image: © Copyright Eric Jones.



Figure 2.3 Traditional English village. Image: © Ruth McAreavey.

The challenge of affordable rural housing in the English context has been around for many decades and there is little prospect that it is going to be solved anytime soon. Rather, the reverse, as the pandemic appears to have increased demand for rural living with demand outstripping supply and house prices in some rural areas increasing by as much as 29 percent in 2020 and overall by much more than in urban areas (cf. Booth, 2021; Peachey, 2021). Homes transcend the obvious provision of shelter and are associated with wider community benefits as well as a healthy economy. The key challenges revolve around issues of affordability, availability and accessibility. In North Yorkshire the average property costs £400,000 while the weekly wage in the county is just over £530 (North Yorkshire Rural Commission, 2021). This is not sustainable as those employed in the local economy, including key workers, cannot afford to live in their community and are forced to move out, travelling back into the locality for work. Second-home ownership is increasingly prevalent in places with high amenity value, such as small towns and villages in the Lake District or the Yorkshire coast where it is over 30 percent or parts of the West Country where it sits at around 25 percent. In some communities, older people live in houses that are much too large for their needs, but the housing stock is limited and they have few options for downsizing if they wish to remain in the area. Planning processes quite obviously strongly influence housing markets, but the reach of their influence goes beyond, impacting on the liveability of particular places and on their wider sustainability.

Community-led solutions and small-scale schemes led by Registered Providers have filled some housing gaps across England. These developments typically have a very low carbon footprint and are designed to very high building standards. Not only is this good for energy consumption and thus the environment, but it means that the houses are inexpensive to run and therefore very suitable for people working in a low-wage economy. While this section has illustrated the peculiar challenge of rural housing in England and Northern Ireland<sup>2</sup>, it demonstrates interconnections between different pillars of sustainability demonstrating how they cannot be disaggregated.

## **Rural sustainability**

Since the Brundtland Commission pushed environmental concerns into the public realm, debates have persisted on what constitutes sustainable development, with economic, social and environmental considerations negotiated by different interest groups. Popular understanding of sustainable development was one where the environment was the main concern and economic and social aspects somewhat secondary. That has evolved and it is recognised that the different pillars of sustainable development intertwine and cannot be isolated from one another. In the more recent past, discussions have flourished around development itself, what it means and why it is assumed that development is a desirable state. Green growth emerged as a central theme in the Rio+ 20 conference on Sustainable Development (Kallis and Hickel, 2020), this being an

attempt to link the three domains of sustainable development. According to the OECD, green growth fosters ‘economic growth and development while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies’ (2011a: 18). However, Kallis and Hickel (2020) argue that because green growth is a theoretical possibility does not provide a reason to design a policy around it, asserting that ‘it seems likely that the insistence on green growth is politically motivated’ (2020: 483). Instead, degrowth of production and consumption may be a more effective way of staying within planetary boundaries and ensuring better environmental, social and economic outcomes globally (Kallis *et al.*, 2012). This radical perspective contests longstanding notions about economic growth and development as being the ultimate societal goal. It also demonstrates a key challenge to understanding and defining sustainability—how to mediate the diverse interests of different stakeholders and thus effectively govern? In a rural context, who are the legitimate stakeholders? What may be sustainable to a small business owner may not align with sustainability as defined by an environmentalist or that as understood by a housing developer.

Some of these complexities have heightened in a rural context following the exit of the UK from the European Union and the emergence of a new agricultural policy agenda as discussed earlier in this chapter. In England, it has been used as an opportunity to address environmental concerns and, in the process, to transform agricultural land-use. This promises to reconfigure the role of agriculture in society and the support afforded to it, but with a real danger that environmental interests will overshadow broader sustainable development aspirations, namely economic and social factors. This is a classic dilemma for advancing sustainable development (and the impact of that specific policy on English rural livelihoods and its wider rural economy is not yet clear).

More apparent is the profound impact of the pandemic on rural communities across the UK, placing more pressure on already highly desirable locations with as yet untold consequences for the longer term. By bringing the rural centre stage, it has been set up somewhat in the shadow of English Victorian philanthropists, as offering things that the urban cannot provide – low population density, clean air and virus-free space.

This chapter has provided an overview of key features of rural areas, highlighting the diversity across the UK in terms of age profiles, ethnic diversity, and land-use. It has shown how social constructions of rural prevail, particularly in the English context, but rural is not causal. It is a space through which global processes flow. It is also a space with multiple and competing stakeholder interests. The exit of the UK from the EU has laid bare some of the tensions around enacting sustainable rural policies – be they relating to agriculture, the environment or wider climate change. Creating necessary governing structures to fully explore different interests such as growth and degrowth agendas or between rural residents with different priorities and interests is a major challenge in achieving sustainable rural communities.



## Notes

- 1 In this project, and in collaboration with artist and practitioner, Henna Asikainen, we have been bringing refugees from the city of Newcastle in the North East of England into Northumberland's National Park.
- 2 Housing issues in Wales and Scotland have not been explored. Suffice it to say that they are complex and differ across different parts of both countries. For instance house prices in rural areas accessible to Edinburgh and Glasgow are distinct to the issue facing Crofters and housing quality in remote and rural island communities.

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# 3 Rural governance of the United Kingdom in and out of the European Union

*Sean Heron*

## Introduction

The referendum held in the United Kingdom (UK) on 23rd June 2016 resulted in a vote in favour of leaving the European Union (EU). The explanation for this is not the aim of this chapter, and indeed due to the scale of complexity, it would require more than a chapter in an edited collection. One of the plausible explanations, however, is a generally expressed desire for a change in the governance of the UK whose faults had been laid at the feet of the EU (Menon and Wager, 2020). In this argument put forward during the referendum, and long before, the problems that the UK faced could only be solved with a repatriation of power, and greater freedom to use the powers that the UK already held. Rural communities were specifically targeted as identifiable victims of EU laws and potential beneficiaries of Brexit (Brooks, 2020).

In this discourse, the policies and institutions synonymous with EU membership were targeted as though they were chains around the neck of rural people. Popular narratives were that the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was an overly burdensome weight on farmers' shoulders (Swinbank, 2016); or the birds and habitats directives disproportionately halted progress and economic development, holding rural communities back (Stone, 2017). Equally, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) and the sanctions that went along with funding made rural dwellers (and government ministers) afraid to act (Gove, 2016).

Brexit was presented as an opportunity to change all of that, to change the governance of the UK from the top to the bottom. It would allow for policies made by the elected representatives of the UK and devolved governments as opposed to those made by an EU, critiqued as undemocratic; policies that were properly suited for the regions of the UK rather than those developed for places unlike the many diverse localities in the UK and finally to allow local people to decide the actions to take on their own land instead of dictating what they must do under threat of financial ruin.

In this chapter, I will outline the ways in which governance of the rural has changed by better conceptualising what these changes mean beyond the immediate. The focus will be on what they mean for how the structure and intentions of governance in the UK differ due to Brexit, or how they allow the UK to

differ in the future. This will require three brief preliminary sections, first, what is meant by governance, second, what is meant by the rural, and third, what is sustainability, and how is this governed. This last section is important as it ties the rest together as sustainability is the defining concept and challenge of the 21st century. Once this has been established I will outline rural governance in and out of the European Union, focussing on the architecture of governance, agriculture, rural policy and environmental policy.

### **Governance**

The term governance has exploded in usage since the 1980s with a resulting lack of clarity in its meaning. Kooiman (2003) defines governance as “the totality of theoretical conceptions on governing”. Governing here is the key, he defines governing as “the totality of interactions, in which public as well as private actors participate, aimed at solving societal problems or creating societal opportunities”. This definition is of course very broad reflecting that governance has become prominent largely due to a diffusion of power beyond the state which has been observed since at least the 1980s (Bevir, 2013).

Described by Rhodes (2007, p. 1248) as a “hollowing out of the state” the emergence of governance as a phenomenon is better described as a redistribution of existing power vertically, between institutions, and horizontally, to new private and public actors, and the emergence of new powers. Two theories of why this redistribution occurred are of interest here. The first is that as expectations of the public grew in areas such as the environment governing demands placed on the state became increasingly complex in scale and scope (Goetz, 2008). This required a re-arrangement of power including the scale at which decisions had to be made, and the ways in which they were implemented as well as who implemented the decisions. It was evident in the UK from at least the 1980s and resulted in an expansion of the EU’s remit. The EU was deemed to be a body that could ensure that nation states could tackle environmental concerns in particular as they would not be undercut by their neighbours whose firms would gain a competitive market advantage (Marks, Hooghe and Blank, 1996; Jordan, 1999).

Multi-level governance theory was developed as an attempt to conceptualise a Europeanised form of governance with decision-making power split at different levels and shared between levels (Marks, Hooghe and Blank, 1996; Bache and Flinders, 2004). EU Members States agree to pool sovereignty at the supranational level in some policy areas making the EU supreme, while maintaining supremacy in others. Crucial to this pooling of sovereignty was the establishment of a supranational judicial institution the CJEU. The CJEU acts as the protector of the balancing act of multi-level governance ensuring that those laws that are made at the EU level are implemented by nation states, and that states act within the competency they accepted as a member of the EU. Further to this, policy areas in which the EU holds the competency, like the environment, undergo a process that Radaelli (2004) calls Europeanisation.



Radaelli (*ibid.*, p. 3) describes this as a “process” of construction, diffusion and institutionalisation for formal and informal “ways of doing things”, shared beliefs and norms “which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated” in the domestic sphere. In setting out clear and distinct roles for different levels multi-level governance theory increases understanding of the process of policy-making in the EU, what each level of government does, and how these interact. This is particularly useful when considering how governance in the UK after Brexit must disentangle itself from this web.

### ***Rural***

As Chapter 2 discussed the issue of defining the rural at length, I will only briefly draw from McAreavey’s chapter to bring out those areas that are governed at the EU level and may be subject to de-Europeanisation. McAreavey rightly noted that rural life across the UK is remarkable for its diversity of experience and the common view of the countryside as homogenous originates from a time when the rural “was more closely aligned with primary production” and rural policy was almost synonymous with agricultural policy. Gallent (2008) argues that rural policy has been intimately tied to agricultural policy, and agricultural interests, since the Scott Report “Report of the Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas” in 1942. The Scott Report argued that agricultural land should be exempt from planning regulations to encourage intensification and expansion and that agricultural land should be protected from “urban encroachment”. The focus of this report, and subsequent policy development, are a result of the view of the environment as synonymous with agricultural land, the view that England was a “green and pleasant land” (Gallent, 2008, p. 114; Woods, 2011). Secondly, it was informed by the experiences of food shortages during the Second World War which resulted in an increased anxiety around food security. In 1947, the UK Parliament passed the Agriculture Act which set in motion the productivist paradigm in which food production secured a privileged position in British politics as an issue of national security (Murdoch and Ward, 1997; Gallent, 2008). This paradigm continued with the UK’s admission into the European Economic Community (EEC), with the UK policy being subsumed into the CAP, which had many of the same foibles (Wilson, 2001; Potter and Tilzey, 2005; Erjavec and Erjavec, 2015).

As the largest single expenditure of the EEC, and latterly EU, the CAP came under constant pressure to reform. The 1980s saw food gluts across the EEC with coupled support pushing an increase in production without the market to support it and an increase in recognition of the environmental harm that the productivist push for intensification had caused. The MacSharry reforms in 1992, a result of the 1988 Brundtland report, sought to provide a reform of the CAP and declared European agriculture as multifunctional with the competing pillars of economic, environmental and social development (Greer, 1996). Subsequent CAP reform was increasingly led by international trade governance which pushed for a liberalisation of the market. Under pressure from the World Trade Organisation,

the European Union claimed that there was a particular European model of agriculture that required protection, however, continued pressure to liberalise resulted in the decoupling of support from production (Potter and Tilzey, 2007). The CAP then split into two pillars, the first, a land-based subsidy, as opposed to the volume-based subsidy pre-MacSharry. The second pillar was a fund devoted to social and environmental projects. The percentage of fund in this pillar has gradually increased since its inception (Dibden, Potter and Cocklin, 2009).

At the time that the CAP reform debate was ongoing, alternative options were being developed at the EEC level to limit the environmental degradation of the countryside brought about by the CAP, amongst others. Two premier examples of these are The Birds Directive which was adopted in 1979 and The Habitats Directive which was adopted in 1992 (Gibbs, While and Jonas, 2007; Borrass, Sotirov and Winkel, 2015; Morgera *et al.*, 2017). These directives required member states to identify and protect various species and habitats that were under threat in their land, primarily to protect biodiversity. These types of designations would join domestic designations such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest in Great Britain and Areas of Special Scientific Interests in Northern Ireland. The domestic designations tend to have a more limited geographic area and reason for designation, the sum affect being a rural funded through agricultural policy funding but interspersed with these specially protected areas (Graham, Amos and Plumpre, 2003; Selman, 2009; Jones, 2013; Deguignet *et al.*, 2017).

### **Sustainability**

The expressed motivation for the developments discussed previously was primarily to make the agriculture industry, and other economic development in rural areas more “sustainable”. The origin of sustainability in the political sphere was the 1987 Brundtland Report which defined sustainable development as “Development that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 16). The report, focussing on the needs of developing nations, highlighted three fundamental pillars of sustainability: economic, environmental and social. This breakdown has influenced policies across Europe, including in the development of the CAP, and in developed nations, it is applied in a way that is not strictly as seen in Brundtland (Cocklin and Moon, 2020). Economic sustainability is interpreted in a number of ways, here it means that farms must be profitable or economically viable as a business. The pillar of economic sustainability can most often be seen as a counter-balance to activities aiming to achieve environmental and social sustainability.

Environmental sustainability is the objective synonymous with the concept of sustainability generally, and considers the need to avoid environmental degradation when making economic decisions, or reverse existing environmental degradation to a level that can be economically maintained. Oft forgotten social sustainability is about the negative effects of economic or environmental activity on people, in particular communities that are marginalised in economic

terms. Social sustainability puts equity at the centre of sustainability ensuring that marginalised groups do not bear the burden of addressing environmental or economic sustainability. This pillar is prominent within the Just Transition movement which aims to ensure that environmental sustainability is achieved, but not at the expense of a particular community. The 2014–2020 CAP reform process placed these three pillars front and centre with the potential for environmental reform of the CAP limited to ensure economic sustainability, and a maintenance of the single farm payment required to ensure social sustainability of marginal farms in less productive land (Allen *et al.*, 2014).

The reform process for CAP offers an insight into how sustainability is governed as each of the pillars may jostle for prominence. It is important to note that these pillars may not actually be in conflict with one another, however, problems and solutions are viewed through an ideological lens and must fit in with a wider political landscape. As an example, green growth may privilege economic and environmental pillars presenting a win-win while a just transition view may privilege environmental and social pillars (Chaigneau and Brown, 2016; McCauley and Heffron, 2018; Fletcher *et al.*, 2019). Governance provides a mechanism to negotiate between competing components of sustainability because generally it is not possible to address each equally. During these negotiations, uneven power relations and priorities act to favour a particular component while trying to minimise adverse effects on the others.

Governments put in place regulations to prevent environmental degradation through the application of fines other punitive measures. The environmental regulations deriving from EU law are supported by the legal grounding of principles found in Article 191(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Lee and Scotford, 2019). One of the most well-known of these is the precautionary principle in which where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage measures to prevent environmental degradation can be put in place without full scientific certainty. This is important as it has been targeted as causing “unnecessary red tape” and preventing economic growth which is often synonymous with economic sustainability (UK Government, 2021). Finally, there is social sustainability which governance structures attempt to achieve primarily through funding and encouraging organisation and empowerment. An example here is the Leader programme which did not just fund community projects in marginalised rural communities, but demanded a governance network structure to increase the capacity and resilience of the communities for the future (Scott, 2004; Konečný, 2019).

## Rural governance in and out of the European Union

### *Institutional architecture*

The EU is made up of seven primary institutions with complex dynamics between the institutions as policy is made, implemented and enforced (Peterson and Hodson, 2017). The UK’s exit from this system is simpler in some ways than

others. For example, the roles of the European Commission and the European Parliament in areas of EU competency will be absorbed into the UK cabinet and UK parliament respectively when these powers are repatriated to the UK. Although it should be noted this is complicated by the presence of the devolved governments which will be explored later. The third party in the policy-making process, The Council of the European Union, will not be directly carried over as it is brought into existence due to the international nature of the EU. The core of The Council of the European Union is about finding compromise and agreement across nation states, similarly The European Council. The replacement for this within the UK is the international agreements they are party to, and most importantly in this context, the trade agreement that was signed with the EU, The Trade and Co-operation Agreement (TCA). Finally, and with relevance to the TCA, is one of the most important institutions of the EU, CJEU. It is the CJEU that interprets EU law and member state implementation of EU law, holding them to account when they fall short. Burns *et al.* (2017) argue that the CJEU has played the biggest role in improving the environmental sustainability of the UK. This section will consider the role of the TCA and Northern Ireland Protocol, the balance of powers between UK and Devolved Governments in the repatriation process and the “governance gap” of the missing CJEU.

Central to the ability of the UK government to progress with its own vision for the future are the various agreements – trade, international – that it signs. The most important of these, at the moment, is the trade and co-operation agreement with the European Union. This fell short of what many hoped and leaves the UK out of many of the EU’s environmental safeguards (Howe *et al.*, 2021). There was a commitment from both sides to maintaining a level playing field through “non-regression”. This is as opposed to “dynamic alignment” or harmonisation which would require the UK standards to progress in the same ways as the EUs. This means that where there is existing protection, or existing targets, the UK should not attempt to undo them via legislation or lack of enforcement. This is due to the inclusion of the environment and climate in the agreement around maintaining a “level playing field” meaning that the UK should apply the same level of environmental protection (MacLennan and Forwood, 2021). This means that any changes in governance or legislation, which are still allowed as they are not held to the precise policy of the directives, may be subject to a dispute mechanism if either party feels it creates an unlevel playing field. These are “rebalancing measures” which may come after discussion in the various special committees established as a part of the EU-UK Trade and Co-operation Agreement architecture, with the potential for wider repercussions (*ibid.*). In this, there is more significant leeway than if UK had stayed within the Single Market or even the Customs Union (Howe *et al.*, 2021). The UK negotiating position was motivated by the desire to move outwith the jurisdiction of the CJEU. Elsewhere in this collection authors have written about the consequences of the TCA, for example, McAreavey highlighted the potential effect that the ending of freedom of movement may have on the rural economy.

A condition prior to the negotiation of the Trade and Co-operation Agreement was the negotiation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland (The Union and the United Kingdom, 2020). The signing of the Northern Irish Protocol has meant that Northern Ireland remains under the Juris of the EU in certain subject areas (*ibid.*). Particularly relevant are those pertaining to the agri-food industry as a result of the heavily integrated all-island agri-food industry. However, as with the TCA agreed between the EU and UK the birds, habitats and water directives are not included within the protocol which may lead to divergence and governance issues across the Island of Ireland.

Northern Ireland is not the only nation within the UK to diverge from the position of the UK government. As noted, the repatriation of powers has been complicated and contested and earlier membership of the EU and the UK's devolved system facilitated an effective multi-level governance. Many of the powers that have returned from the EU were legislated at EU level and implemented at the devolved level, bypassing the UK government's administration entirely. In both agriculture policy and environmental governance devolved governments have challenged the position of the UK government which has resulted in the UK government and three devolved governments developing their own agriculture policy, and the devolved governments attempting to resist a "power grab" by Westminster (Reid, 2017; Torrance, 2020). The UK government has tried to cut off this divergence at root by the passing of the Internal Markets Bill 2019, although this is more specifically concerned with the construction of internal economic barriers (Gravey, 2020).

This political contestation highlights a concern regarding the potential for divergence and gaps within the governance system of the UK. The Internal Markets Bill places a barrier on devolved nation policy making, and how this is interpreted is crucial for governance across the UK (*ibid.*). Disputes between devolved nations and the UK government require an arbitration mechanism, which is currently the Supreme Court. This presents a political issue as the UK system is asymmetrical with constitutional sovereignty technically sitting with the Westminster Parliament. Whether or not sovereignty is exercised against the will of any of the devolved governments, it creates tension. While this is a problem that has long existed, it has been exacerbated by Brexit and highlights a potential governance gap, the lack of judiciary authority holding the government to account. As stated, the EU's governance architecture with the CJEU sitting as the ultimate authority was considered a crucial mechanism for achieving compliance with environmental regulation. In an attempt to replace this with regards to the environment the UK government has suggested a new watch-dog, the Office for Environmental Protection. The OEP is an insufficient replacement for the CJEU for a number of reasons, one being its geographic scope which will only cover England and Northern Ireland with both Scotland and Wales pursuing their own environmental governance structures (Lee, 2018, 2019; Lee and Scotford, 2019; Moore *et al.*, 2019). This raises the problem of a divergence of environmental governance across the UK as interpretation may differ across institutions, and

a potential for dual coverage as UK-wide institutions may have the authority to intervene in areas that are reserved in the devolved nations.

Within the Environment Act 2021, which founded the OEP, a proposal regarding environmental principles was also put forward. This Bill enshrined more principles than were included within the EU's treaties, however, these principles were reduced in legal status. One of the reasons for this is that it is harder to change EU treaties than UK law, another is that the legal status of principles in UK legislation is lower than in the EU with the status being that ministers must "have due regard to the policy statement on environmental principles currently in effect" (Lee and Scotford, 2019; Eustice and Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park, 2021, p. 147; Scotford, 2021). The Environment Bill as it stands is likely to have further effects, particularly on Northern Ireland. As Northern Ireland has sought to be brought under the remit of the OEP they are required to put forward an "environment improvement plan" covering a period of no less than 15 years by which the executive is held to account (Eustice and Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park, 2021). The new architecture arising around Brexit then has a significant effect on how the rural is governed, the rural environment in particular, and this effect is different in different parts of the UK.

### ***Agriculture policy***

As has been mentioned previously in this chapter, the CAP was the central policy with which both the EU and the UK chose to govern rural areas specifically. The CAP was a major target of ire for both supporters and opponents of Brexit, and a general feeling that reforming agricultural policy after Brexit would be a benefit emerged from both sides after the vote (UK Government, 2018; Gravey, 2019; Howe and Ross, 2019; Moore *et al.*, 2019). This is not without its complications as the aforementioned contestation of policy repatriation has resulted in each of the four governments in the UK developing separate policies with differing aims (Reid, 2017; Greer, 2018; Gravey, 2019). Chapter 4 examines in some detail the English Environmental Land Management scheme, but it would be remiss not to include it very briefly in this analysis. The Environmental Land Management scheme which, after a transition period of seven years, will cover England is a replacement of the CAP with a removal of the Single Farm Payment with a payment for the provision of public goods, for the most part environmental public goods (Little and Tsouvalis, 2020). This scheme is intended to incentivise good environmental practices, contribute towards environmental recovery, and support the rural economy. It represents a wholesale change from the CAP system and may have significant effects for the food system, the rural economy and England's landscapes (Helm, 2017; UK Government, 2018).

The Welsh Government, within the devolved nations, seek to transition to a scheme most closely resembling the English scheme, with the development the Sustainable Farming Scheme. Aiming to launch in 2025 the scheme will address climate change, public health and environmental issues, all of which

are associated with the current agricultural system (Welsh Government, 2020). The Welsh Government has prioritised these within the UK and it has arguably the most advanced environmental governance architecture with both the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Environment Act (2016) (Cowell *et al.*, 2018). Although there is little exact detail on exactly what will be funded it is clear that the Single Farm Payment is being transitioned out and Welsh farmers will be paid for their actions rather than their land (Welsh Government, 2020). Again, this is likely to have significant consequences for the food system, rural economy and landscapes of Wales. On the other hand, as the average Welsh farmer operates on marginal unproductive land, the changes may be less severe and result in increased social sustainability for rural communities (Dwyer, 2018).

Scotland has entered into a five-year transition period up until 2024 which has seen the simplification of current CAP schemes with the removal of one of the three greening requirements of the CAP, the continuing payment of less-favoured area support which accounts for 75 percent of Scottish agricultural land and the reintroduction of coupled support for their suckler cow and upland sheep producers (Scottish Government, 2020a). While the Scottish scheme has entered a five-year transition period up to 2024, the longer-term future of agricultural policy remains unclear (Scottish Government, 2020a; Lampkin *et al.*, 2021). Hart and Baldock (2019, p. 4) highlight that the key themes emerging in the debates are natural capital, production efficiency, and a strong emphasis on climate change with a similar move towards payment for public goods (Lampkin *et al.*, 2021).

On the other hand, the Executive in Northern Ireland has sought to keep and adapt more of the traditional CAP to better fit the government's policy objectives. A partial explanation for this is the restrictions on policy development between 2016 and 2020. In late 2016, the Northern Ireland Executive was thrown into a crisis that resulted in the collapse of the power-sharing agreement. Further to this, the Northern Ireland Protocol has placed limitations on what the Northern Ireland Executive can do (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, 2018, 2021). Further, more than any other region, Northern Ireland's farmers, and the rural economy, due to the size of the agri-food sector, has become reliant on the single farm payment (W. Grant, 2018). During the transitional period to a new policy, most of the greening requirements of the single farm payment have been dropped from the most recent payments as the government claimed they constituted an excessive administrative burden for little environmental gain (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, 2018). A distinct move, shared only by Scotland in the UK, Northern Ireland aims to reintroduce coupled support measures for their economically vulnerable suckler cow and breeding ewe producers (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, 2021). Northern Ireland's framework for the future of agricultural support is borne out of the Going for Growth strategy, an export-orientated agri-food strategy developed by the government in partnership with the sector through the Agri-Food Strategy Board 2013 (Agri-Food Strategy Board, 2013). This ties income support, as well as other support measures, to farmer actions that will

increase farm productivity in the sector and government hope will drive growth in the wider rural economy.

This overview of the agricultural policies and debates which have emerged in the UK highlights the diversity that exists and differences that were obscured by the CAP. These different policies reflect the priorities of the governments, the different landscapes in which farmers work, and the different roles that farmers take in the wider rural economy. It is clear from the above that different attitudes towards sustainability have been taken in the governance of rural areas with economic and environmental sustainability leading discussion in England, environmental and social sustainability predominant in Wales, economic and social sustainability prioritised in Northern Ireland, and policy too uncertain to determine in Scotland, yet a balance between the three can be observed.

### ***Rural policy***

As the multi-functional nature of agriculture came to be acknowledged in European policy, rural policy began to be untangled from agriculture. Indeed, rural has undergone a significant journey to be distinguishable from primary production of all sorts. As mentioned in previous sections, the primary funding source for rural areas, the CAP, started to undergo reform and distributed income away from just farmers. The CAP was split into two pillars, the first was an income support mechanism for farmers, the second was for rural development. While the CAP is the largest source of funding, and reserved for rural areas, rural areas have also benefitted from EU funds not specifically reserved for them. For example, cohesion funding, for less-developed regions, which includes areas such as Cornwall, received 2.6 billion euros between 2014 and 2020. It is harder to disaggregate the rural from the urban in the categories of transition region and more developed regions which received 2.5 billion euros and 5.6 billion euros respectively (European Commission, 2020a). These are not inconsiderable amounts of money and align with the strategic goals laid out in other EU policy. Other funds are also potentially beneficial for rural areas such as the European Social Fund, and particularly European Territorial Cooperation Programmes which focus on border regions, which tend to be rural. Scotland, Ireland and Northern Ireland have taken particular advantage of Interreg funding for environmental projects (European Commission, 2020b; Scottish Government, 2020b; Special EU Programmes Body, 2021).

It is not just the sums of money and their distribution which is important, but the conditions attached as these reflect the changes that the EU are attempting to make. The clearest example of this is the LEADER programme which implemented the Rural Development Programmes out of CAP Pillar 2, this was a local development method that involved local actors in the co-production of projects in rural development through the membership of Local Action Groups (Konečný, 2019). This co-production was as much about capacity building in rural areas as it was about the injection of money into communities as they sought to create a governance network that would pro-actively identify and solve problems in their



local communities. This initiative, under the broader approach of community-led local development, was extended to three additional EU funds, the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, the European Regional Development fund and the European Social fund. By 2018, 61percent of the EU rural population had been covered by a local action group involving public, private and civil society stakeholders leader, local action groups, capacity building, smart villages initiative (European Commission, 2020c). Therefore, the leadership at the local level in identification of problems and solutions, and active collaborative implementation is an important characteristic of rural governance in the EU.

These various funds of considerable money have focussed on a variety of aims and appealed to applicants from across the UK. The second pillar of CAP formed part of the agricultural policy and the funds will be absorbed back into whatever agricultural policy the different regions take. The UK government has promised to replace EU structural funds with the Shared Prosperity Fund, a scheme that will at least match the level of EU spending in each region. This means that funding in England and Scotland, at £130 per person and £180 per person is lower than in Northern Ireland at £280 per person, and far lower than Wales which benefitted from £780 per person (The Institute for Government, 2018).

The Shared Prosperity Fund forms part of the UK governments Levelling Up agenda through which they plan to distribute funds throughout the UK to promote economic development and increase standards of living. The UK Internal Market (UKIM) Act (2020) gave UK ministers powers to spend money directly in the devolved nations in devolved policy areas (Nice, Paun and Hall, 2021). These is a risk here that funding may not be targeted in a way that promotes synergy with the agendas with devolved governments thus risking the potential to maximise the impact of spending (McAreavey, 2022). Beyond the Shared Prosperity Fund, the government has announced The Levelling Up Fund which has three different strands: The Community Renewal Fund (revenue funding, 2021–2022); The Levelling Up Fund (capital investment, local authority led, 2021–2025); and The Community Ownership Fund (1st round capital investment, 2021–2025) (ibid.). These differ as, except from in NI which will be managed by the UK government, these are to be managed by lead authorities or councils. In NI, there is a risk that the expertise developed through EU programmes will not be utilised and projects will not secure cross-community support (ibid.). Further, it seems as though the Leader approach to project governance is being abandoned and instead what is being put in place is additional funding for local authorities, and the opportunity to bypass devolved nations. Between the levelling up funds, and the shared prosperity fund it appears it is being used to advance the priorities of the UK government and demonstrate the success of UK's exit from the EU.

### ***Environmental policy***

Prior to the referendum, Green Brexit was not on the agenda. Gravey and Jordan noted that the environment was the blank space in both campaigns (Jordan and Gravey, 2016). Indeed, a survey of environmentalists showed 85 percent support

for remaining in the EU, with three reports published demonstrating the EU's positive impact on the UK's environment. Environmental campaigners thought that the campaign to leave the EU showed very little regard for the environment, and leaving the EU raised too many uncertainties (*ibid.*). This is because that while reforming CAP was a long-held desire of many, the EU was the source of 80 percent of the UK's environmental policy, and the guarantor as demonstrated through the CJEU (Moore and Gravey, 2018). This anxiety was expressed throughout the early stages of the Brexit process prior to the UK's negotiating positions of leaving the customs union and the single market. During this period, there were comparisons of several different types of deals such as a Norwegian, Swiss or Canadian trade deal (Burns *et al.*, 2016; Cave and Allen, 2016; C. Grant, 2018). The Norwegian-style deal would have resulted in the UK's membership of the European Free Trade Association and would have required dynamic alignment with most EU environmental standards, along with the core environmental principles. This would have obviously created quite a different Brexit to the one that was negotiated including a continued role for the CJEU or a similar body. However, even in this closest of deals, EEA states are not required to comply with the Birds Directive or the Habitats Directive (Burns *et al.*, 2016).

The Birds and Habitats Directives provide protection for over 100 species of bird and 75 different habitat types in the UK. These protections feature strongly in the UK's network of protected areas and place restrictions on activity and development in areas that are deemed ecologically important. This has contributed significantly to the recovery in certain species, and although they could be implemented better and complemented by other measures, these directives form a key part of the UK's environmental governance. These laws have specifically been targeted by Eurosceptics as "unnecessary red tape", and the Prime Minister himself has stated that economic growth should not be restricted by "newts" (Parker, 2017). This comes to the so-called balance or compromise to be struck by economic and environmental sustainability, often the environment is sacrificed at the altar of economic growth.

Given the nature of the EU-UK TCA, it is unlikely that these environmental measures will be adequately guaranteed if they could not be in a Norway-style arrangement. Some have pointed to the level playing field provisions which allow either party to take counter-measures should they believe divergences are distorting trade. Removal of these protections could result in counter-measures. This will be subject to the interpretation of both parties, and the institutions involved in dispute settlement (Howe *et al.*, 2021; Marshall *et al.*, 2021). Given how the UK has acted already in areas of higher political saliency it is unlikely that the risk of a drawn-out bureaucratic dispute mechanism will offer adequate protection for these designations (Marshall *et al.*, 2021). As with many environmental concerns, it will likely be too late for the habitats or species should the protections be re-instated.

All of the above is not to say that the UK government will weaken the protected status of these sites, however, they do now have the ability to do so. What is most likely is that they will attempt to enact a protected area policy that is

more cohesive with their overall political agenda: this being a policy stream that is outcomes focussed rather than prescriptive. This can be seen with the move to environmental land management schemes from the CAP in which the government will reward those actions which see increases in natural capital (Helm, 2016, 2017; UK Government, 2018). It is this quantification of nature that is likely to be central to government policy, and the risk may be that gains in one location may be allowed to make up for losses elsewhere providing a patchwork of protection rather than a robust area-based scheme (Coffey, 2016; Fletcher *et al.*, 2019).

## Conclusion

The ways in which the EU governed rural in the UK were vast and what will become of rural governance after Brexit remains to be seen. This chapter has offered insights into the myriad ways in which Brexit may change the framework for governing the rural. But the key is that it may be changed. The most critical component of Brexit is the very limited trade deal that the government negotiated. This has left the current, and any future, government, a lot of scope to change the very fabric of our rural communities, economies and environments while removing many of the previous checks on its power.

The application of different governance architecture across the UK will present a difficulty in co-operation between reserved and devolved areas. Issues such as data collection and sharing between organisations, prioritisation of agendas, and reporting of international obligations may potentially create gaps (Burns, Jordan and Gravey, 2017). The messy and contested nature of the UK's asymmetrical devolution has already created ill-will, counter-legislation and resulted in action in courtrooms (Reid, 2017). This is not the co-operation that is necessary for tackling environmental problems which do not recognise these borders. Even more so in Northern Ireland which has been cast adrift in a no-man's land of non-membership of the EU without full access to the UK's strengths. Due to the politically contentious nature of the Irish/Northern Irish Protocol the DUP, who hold Ministry in the Department for Environment, Agriculture and Rural Affairs, are boycotting the North South Ministerial Council which encourages cooperation across the border in six areas, including the environment and agriculture (BBC News, 2021).

As the EU has recognised, agricultural policy requires recognition of the distinct industries and social fabrics of each state. This has been reflected in the UK after Brexit as each nation has chosen to take its own road to develop a sustainable agriculture policy balancing the economic, environmental and social components. England has sought to liberalise the agricultural sector and has developed a proto-market for environmental services. Northern Ireland has chosen to support the sector which underpins a significant portion of its economy. Finally, Scotland and Wales have integrated agriculture policy into the wider rural environment policy portfolio placing an emphasis on the environmental and social well-being of upland areas. The three components of sustainability are not separable, but deeply interconnected, and government's choosing to prioritise

one component over another will have consequences for every aspect of rural life. How these policies will play out in the long term, or be altered as policy agendas change is unknown, however, what is most important is that they can change and are only limited by the amount of financial support given. This is certain to be one of the biggest potential changes for rural communities in relation to Brexit.

After Brexit the existing underdeveloped rural policy of the EU looks to be either absorbed into the different agriculture policies across the UK, or will be redistributed to existing rural policies adding funding, removing it from agricultural interests. Otherwise, the UK government has taken those policies which were not strictly rural but of disproportionate benefit to rural communities, and absorbed them into funds for their own development and political goals. Environmental policy, on the other hand, a very extensive EU priority, looks to be entirely up for grabs in the post-Brexit era with the potential for divergence from the EU by the UK, but also potentially within the UK.

This chapter has detailed the significant ways in which the rural is governed, and how this affects sustainability, within the European Union, however, that is not the end. There are many ways in which the rural was governed that did not derive from the EU such as the UK's own protected area designations. Further, there are policy areas that are not distinctly rural yet form an important component of rural governance such as industrial strategy or health and social care reform. These are broad national programmes, however, when they meet rural areas they are often distorted to meet particular demands of that community, or harness the particular strengths of that community. With leaving the EU it is possible that more synergy can be created between Europeanised and non-Europeanised policy areas. An example of this is Cowell *et al.*'s (2020) consideration of the planning system. It should be clear that although we are in the early days of the post-EU era in the UK, there is significant potential for change for the rural and its sustainability is very much still in question.

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# 4 The co-design of post-Brexit agri-environmental policy – focusing on environmental land management in England

*Ruth Little, Jessica Lyon and Judith Tsouvalis*

## Introduction

The UK's departure from the European Union (EU) has been construed by Westminster as an opportunity to radically rethink its approach to agriculture and the environment. A "Green Brexit" was not on the government's agenda prior to the referendum (Heron, in this volume); however, achieving "Brexit" has led to changes that – in conjunction with other post-Brexit developments – leave the UK with many opportunities, challenges, uncertainties and questions regarding the future of farming, rural communities, economies and land use. Indeed, there is now considerable pressure on rural land to serve the needs of many interests, including those linked to ecosystem services provision (e.g., carbon sequestration, water quality and biodiversity), amenity and public health. Wynne-Jones *et al.* (2022) speculate about how these different interests could play out in terms of land ownership, citing the example of large corporations potentially buying up land for tree planting to off-set carbon emissions and the public controversies this has caused regarding the implications of this for rural communities and cultures. In this chapter, we focus on the changes in governance arrangements at the interface of agriculture and the environment, focussing on the co-design of the new Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes in England, which re-orientates policy towards the delivery of "public goods".

In 2019, the EU contributed just under £3.3 billion to the UK's rural economy via Direct Payments to farmers and in rural development funds (Antonopoulos *et al.*, 2022). Four hundred and seventy-two thousand were employed in the UK farming sector, and 71 percent of UK land was under agricultural management (NAO, 2021). A recent study of the potential impact of the transition on farmers has predicted that the number of UK farm businesses could drop by as much as 20 percent by 2030 as a direct result of the phasing out of Direct Payments via the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) – compared with a decline of around four percent over the previous decade (Clarke, 2021). This could lead to a further concentration of the agricultural industry and the further intensification of agricultural production. BPS represented 61 percent of Farm Business Income (profit) across all farm types over the period 2014/2015 to 2016/2017, with large sectoral and geographical differences, indicating the most significant contribution to profit for Grazing Livestock and Mixed farms. For example, in the North East of England,

where Grazing Livestock farms predominate, Direct Payments accounted for 98 percent of Farm Business Income (DEFRA, 2018a). The distributional impacts of the move from BPS to ELM are currently unknown. It is, therefore, imperative that the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the policy is closely monitored as the transition progresses. Inclusive and diverse engagement with stakeholders in the ELM co-design process is also vital to ensure that the potential benefits and unintended consequences of the policy are fully explored and addressed.

Whilst the new Agriculture and Environment Acts will provide the legal frameworks for actions to follow, the new iterations of agri-environment schemes (AES) under development in England and the devolved administrations will reconfigure how farmers, land managers, foresters and others relate to their working environments and nature. ELM is considered to be a critical component in achieving the objectives of the government's 25-year Environment Plan (HM Government, 2018) and other environmental commitments such as Net Zero by 2050. It is based on Natural Capital principles, an approach that advocates the monetisation of "natural assets", and farmers, land managers, foresters and others will, in the future, be remunerated for the production of what the new policy refers to as "public goods". These "goods" include clean air, clean water, thriving wildlife, reduced risk from environmental hazards (e.g., flooding and drought), improved animal welfare, enhanced beauty, heritage and opportunities to engage with the natural environment, and soil protection. Much is at stake here, and to achieve these stated goals, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has committed to co-designing ELM with a broad range of stakeholders across the country. This participatory approach has never been used before for AES policy development, but is widely hailed in government circles to result in better, more workable policy (see Section 3).

This chapter provides an overview of the proposed ELM schemes; discusses the rationale for co-design and progress made to date in the development of ELM; appraises factors that may contribute to the relative success of the new scheme (drawing upon literature on farmer participation in previous schemes); and provides an overview of how agricultural policy can be made more inclusive – both in terms of policy development and uptake – through co-design and strategies of inclusiveness to ensure "harder-to-reach" farmers, land managers and stakeholders can participate as well as the "usual suspects".

## **From the EU's common agricultural policy to UK agricultural policy**

### ***The common agricultural policy: lessons learned***

The EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), introduced in the 1950s, has governed the agricultural industry throughout much of Europe to ensure the production of food and the safeguarding of farming businesses. The majority of the total CAP budget is allocated as "Direct Payments" to farmers and landowners on a

per-hectare basis. In the UK, Direct Payments mainly comprised the BPS and a “greening” component, which was 30 percent of the Direct Payment total, as well as the Young Farmers Scheme.

The productivist nature of the CAP, along with the technological advancement made during the Green Revolution of the 1960s, gave rise to the intensification of agriculture. This trend had already been set in motion in the UK by the passing of the Agriculture Act in 1947 (see Heron, in this volume). Pesticides, fertilisers, irrigation, heavy machinery, expansion of fields and changes in crop rotations, resulted in biodiversity loss, increased water and air pollution and soil degradation (Henle *et al.*, 2008; Posthumus and Morris, 2010).

The CAP design and the allocation of funding on a land area basis has received strong criticisms regarding its:

- (i) Controversial division of funds and payments allocated per hectare owned, which favoured larger, richer farmers and landowners (Bateman and Balmford, 2018)
- (ii) Distortion of the marketplace and land prices (Latruffe and Le Mouël, 2009)
- (iii) Detrimental impact on the natural environment (Brouwer and van Berkum, 1997; Donald *et al.*, 2002)

To address some of these criticisms, the CAP introduced considerations for environmental protection through cross-compliance measures, greening payments, and AES. The cross-compliance and greening measures provided a minimal regulatory requirement for environmental protection; the voluntary AES were more ambitious in their attempt to reverse the damage caused by intensification.

Whilst a step in the right direction, these AES have been mixed in their effectiveness and have received criticisms from farmers for being overly prescriptive and bureaucratic (Sutherland, 2002; Batáry *et al.*, 2015). Research on farmer participation in AES is instructive here because uptake of the new ELM schemes will be an important measure of their success. While financial incentives to take part in AES have been shown to be an important factor influencing farmer decision-making, they are only one of many considerations and considerable variations exist between how farmers take decisions and why regarding AES participation (Tsouvalis and Little, 2019a).

Personality, age, education, economic circumstances, values, perceptions, biophysical factors and socio-cultural environments can all influence how farmers respond to and engage with environmental land management (Rose *et al.*, 2018; Tsouvalis and Little, 2019a, 2019b; Hurley *et al.*, 2022). Past decision-making experiences and concerns about the future can influence present-day thinking, whilst decisions implemented in the past can impact present-day possibilities. Fear of diminished returns and other risks can also play a role. Beyond the circumstances of the farmer, the characteristics of the farm such as its size, wildlife habitats and terrain as well as the farming style and system will further influence if farmers fit into the mould of an AES (Rose *et al.*, 2018). Social and cultural capital factors

can also influence farmer decision-making, including: the size and characteristics of farmers' social networks; levels of trust in government; ability to gain access to group resources; and social standing within a group. Farming landscapes are culturally significant to farmers – not just for food production, but also as places where farmers display their knowledge, values, skills and work ethic (Rogge *et al.*, 2007; Cusworth and Dodsworth 2021). Farming landscapes are evaluated and judged by other farmers and can increase or decrease a farmers' social standing or social capital within the group (De Krom, 2017). Like economic capital, social and cultural capital can be both accumulated and lost over time (Bourdieu 1986; Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011). All three are important factors in pro-environmental management and need to be considered during scheme design.

Since the Second World War, agricultural policy in Britain has centred on food production – driven by the aforementioned “productivist” approach that gave rise to the increased industrialisation and mechanisation of agriculture (Burton, 2004). Rural communities were transformed by this. Labour requirements shrank as people were replaced by machines, which contributed to processes of urbanisation. On farms, technology changed how farming was done and what landscapes it created. Alongside these changing practices developed a farming culture where “good farming” was indicated by “tidy” farms – geometrical farming landscapes where fields have straight, uniformly spaced furrows, are weed and pest free, and achieve high yields (Burton, 2004). While these landscapes might look tidy, the practices and inputs used to achieve food security are known to have caused many of the environmental problems that AESs aim to repair. However, in order to bring about long-term change in the environmental attitudes of farmers, “good-farming” must be decoupled from the culture of “productivism” (Tsouvalis and Little, 2019a).

### ***Brexit and the new UK agricultural policy***

Leaving the EU gave the UK government an opportunity to develop its own UK Agricultural Policy and a chance to address the criticisms made of the CAP. To achieve this, DEFRA expressed an intention to learn from past experiences of farmer participation in AES and to developing new policy with stakeholders via engagement exercises, consultations and co-design methodologies.

In February 2018, DEFRA released a consultation titled “Health and Harmony: the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit”, which provided the framing for the future of agricultural policy post-Brexit and invited opinions from stakeholders (DEFRA, 2018b). Underpinning the Health and Harmony consultation was the commitment to move away from area-based ‘Direct Payments’ to a new policy “underpinned by payment of public money for the provision of public goods” (DEFRA, 2018a).

“Public goods” refer to commodities or services that benefit and are available equally to all in society. They are typically paid for collectively by taxation and administered by governments as there is no incentive to provide them through the market (Fernando, 2020). Determining what is defined as a “public good” (see

Box 4.1), as opposed to a “private good”, is critical in understanding how payments under the UK agricultural policy can be made to farmers (Lyon, 2019).

The Health and Harmony consultation focussed on public goods as environmental outcomes. Under the Agriculture Act – which passed into law in November 2020 (Coe and Finlay, 2020) – public money can be spent on:

- Enriching wildlife habitats and biodiversity
- Improving air and water quality
- Soil and peat protection
- Climate change mitigation and adaptation
- Environmental hazard prevention and protection
- Improvements to animal welfare
- Improvements to crop and plant health
- Supporting public access and education
- Restoration or enhancement of cultural or natural heritage

The delivery of these public goods is associated with improving the environment, mitigating climate change and reaching national targets such as Net Zero by 2050 (HM Government, 2021) and the objectives of the 25-year Environmental Plan (HM Government, 2018).

Notably missing from the list of ‘goods’ that the UK government will subsidise is the production of food. Many hold the view that, as food is sold in the marketplace and paid for by consumers, food production should not be subsidised by the public; it is a private enterprise commodity. Otherwise, society would pay for food production twice: once as consumers and once as taxpayers (Bateman and Balmford, 2018). However, some see access to food that meets acceptable health and quality standards as a human right and therefore characterise it as a “public good” (Hamilton *et al.*, 2003; Timmermann 2018; Lyon, 2019). Despite

#### **Box 4.1 DEFRA’s Understanding of “Public Goods”**

The definition of a “public good” for ELM is drawn from The Green Book (HM Treasury, 2020), which is the guidance issued by HM Treasury on how to appraise policies, programmes and projects.

Following it, DEFRA defined a public good as

goods or services that no one can be stopped from using and where one person’s use does not affect another’s. For the environment, this includes such goods as an attractive landscape or a public park. If left to the market alone, the benefits to society provided by these goods would be underprovided or not provided at all, due to a lack of profit incentive.

(DEFRA, 2021a)

divergent views of “food” as a public good, the UK government decided to focus on supporting environmental protection measures and not food production in its new policy, although the new policy will contain measures to support farmers in business performance via the Farming Investment Funds. Grants available here will support farmers to invest in equipment, technology, and infrastructure to improve overall farm productivity, profitability as well as farm environmental sustainability (DEFRA, 2022a)

### ***Devolved nations***

In public discourse, the post-Brexit agricultural policy direction has frequently been referred to as “UK Farming Policy” or “UK Agricultural Policy” and the UK Agriculture Bill has been described as “an effective system in place to support UK farmers” (DEFRA, 2018b). However, agriculture is a devolved issue principally because the sector is not homogenous across the UK, with farm types, sizes and incomes varying widely between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Downing and Coe, 2018) (refer, also, to Attorp and Hubbard in this volume).

The Health and Harmony consultation and the Agriculture Bill therefore mainly outline the future of agriculture in England, and not the whole of the UK. The UK government believes the policy frameworks outlined in the Health and Harmony consultation and the Agriculture Bill could act as “a vision that could work for the whole of the UK” (DEFRA, 2018b), however, they recognise that “devolution provides each administration with the powers to decide its own priorities” (ibid.). The UK government intends to continue working with the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Governments to establish a common framework of support for agriculture which will cover aspects of:

- agricultural support spending including AES
- marketing standards
- crisis measures, public intervention and private storage aid
- cross border farms
- data collection and sharing (DEFRA, 2020b)

Whilst common frameworks are to be established, “the systems and schemes that govern each devolved nations” policy are likely to be different in form. The devolved nations have conducted their own consultations to garner initial ideas and elicit stakeholder feedback on the direction of their national agricultural policy post-Brexit (Welsh Government, 2019; DAERA, 2021; Scottish Government, 2021). Like the Health and Harmony consultation, consultations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have a key theme of environmental sustainability, protecting biodiversity and combating climate change. The devolved nations have decided to prolong their consultation periods and start reducing their Direct Payments to farmers at a later date than in England. The devolved nations have also expressed an intent to learn from stakeholders by engaging with them through consultations, focus groups and other engagement exercises. As England



has a more detailed policy, the chapter now turns to focus on the specific elements of the ELM schemes and their development.

## **Environmental land management**

### ***Environmental land management schemes***

The policy which will deliver the “payments for public goods” principle in England are the three new, complementary, ELM schemes described in this section. First outlined in the UK Government “25 Year Environmental Plan” (HM Government, 2018) and the “Health and Harmony” consultation (DEFRA, 2018b) ELM schemes are defined as an “Environmental Land Management Contract” that could span several years, between the farmer or land manager and the government that will support farmers in delivering public goods. Since their inception, the intention of ELM schemes was to improve on the prescriptive and bureaucratic AES that were criticised as part of the CAP and develop schemes that would allow farmers greater capacity to innovate and flexibility in how they deliver public goods (DEFRA 2018b).

Farmers will be able to enter a combination of schemes as long as the actions they commit to are compatible and the same actions are not paid for twice across different schemes. In terms of outcomes, DEFRA have stated that “all schemes will be designed to pay for public goods which go above and beyond regulatory baselines” (DEFRA 2022b). The aim here is to reduce the level of complexity that is associated with current AES and for farmers to be able to access a single service that shows them all the available options they can choose from. Details of the options available to farmers under the three ELM schemes (details below) and the proposed payment rates are still under development, as are key details of how monitoring, reporting and compliance will work. In a bid to address criticisms of the previous approach to AES monitoring and compliance, DEFRA has committed to “[fostering] an approach to checking compliance that is more supportive and less punitive for minor discrepancies than previous schemes, whilst preventing fraud or other illegality and addressing more substantive failings where necessary”. (DEFRA, 2022c). Greater use will also be made of advisory letters and support, “rather than automatically applying penalties where we find things that aren’t quite right but the farmer is prepared to take timely action to remedy”. (ibid.). Time will tell if the aims of reduced complexity and bureaucratic burden are able to be realised in practice and how this more assistive approach will be balanced against obligations to achieve environmental targets.

A seven-year transition period in England, from 2021 to 2027, will see the phasing out of subsidies to farmers and landowners through “Direct Payments” towards the “payment of public goods” via the ELM schemes. During this transition period, farmers and landowners will see an incremental reduction in their Direct Payments (DEFRA, 2020a) and a loss of farm income. The money saved in the agricultural policy budget from these deductions will be fed into the new ELM schemes and other types of farming grants and support systems.

ELM scheme design has progressed considerably since its initial inception in the Health and Harmony consultation, and constitutes three schemes: Sustainable Farming Incentive, Local Nature Recovery, and Landscape Recovery. Each of these has different objectives and ambitions in terms of environmental protection and operates at different spatial scales: farm-level, locally tailored, and landscape scale.

**Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI)** – The sustainable farming incentive is the entry-level environmental land management scheme that has the objective of encouraging sustainable farming practices and achieving high uptake from farmers across England. Farmers taking part in SFI will be able to choose from a range of standards based on the “natural assets” they have on their land. They will also be able to choose which level of ambition they will enter into – introductory, medium or advanced – so that they can tailor the scheme to their individual circumstances (DEFRA, 2021b). The scheme “will pay for actions that can be taken at scale across the whole farmed landscape...This includes reducing inorganic fertiliser and pesticide use, taking care of... soils and improving farmland biodiversity, water quality and carbon sequestration” (DEFRA 2022b). SFI has been piloted since November 2021 and roll out will begin in mid-2022 (DEFRA, 2021b).

To achieve a high uptake, the scheme is intended to be simple, easy to manage and accessible to farmers. SFI will be less environmentally ambitious than the other two schemes but will aim to support farmers in managing their land in a sustainable way. The scheme will likely be the first point of entry for farmers wishing to make up the gap in the loss of Direct Payments.

**Local Nature Recovery Scheme (LNR)** – The Local Nature Recovery scheme will pay farmers, land managers and foresters to undertake actions that support and deliver on local environmental priorities. The scheme builds on the Countryside Stewardship scheme, for example, by continuing environmental protection options that were considered to work well and supporting collaboration with a facilitation fund. It also aims to simplify administration and compliance measures (DEFRA, 2022c). Further details surrounding LNR, including the use of Land Management Plans or incentives for farmers to collaborate on delivering outcomes, will be examined through further testing and piloting in 2023, prior to the full scheme roll out by the end of 2024 (DEFRA, 2022c).

Unlike SFI, which will be aimed at high uptake and accessibility for farmers, LNR will need to be ambitious in its environmental objectives to make a meaningful contribution to biodiversity and climate change commitments, including contributing to targets for trees, peatland restoration, habitat creation and restoration and natural flood management (DEFRA 2022b).

**Landscape Recovery Scheme (LR)** – The Landscape Recovery scheme will be targeted at larger scale, long-term, land-use change projects that will help in delivering national-based net-zero targets. This scheme will be the most ambitious in terms of environmental protection and is likely to be more catered towards large landowners and land managers, or organisations and collaborative groups. Ten pilot projects are being launched between 2022 and 2024, aimed at recovering

threatened native species and restoring England's streams and rivers (Burford, 2021).

The three schemes have been developed by policy teams in collaboration with a variety of stakeholders – farmers, land managers, NGOs, trade bodies, environmental and conservation organisations. This has been undertaken through a series of engagement activities, including the application of co-design methodologies that will be discussed later in the chapter. ELM will continue to be refined and developed through the piloting of each of the schemes.

### ***ELM reception and critical response***

As more detail has been released about the ELM schemes, stakeholders have expressed scepticism on the trajectory of the policy, with polarised views from across the environmental and agricultural sectors. Among some environmentalists, there is a fear that ELM has strayed from the initial aims of greater environmental protection and restoration as described in the Health and Harmony consultation, and that the future schemes will be closer to the status quo of previous AES. Environmental and conservation NGOs have criticised the SFI scheme in particular for lacking ambition and for paying farmers for actions that are close to current regulatory requirements (Gilleard *et al.*, 2021; Groom, 2021).

Whilst recognising the importance of concerns over “dumbing down”, it is also important to appreciate that the SFI fulfils an accessibility role, motivating farmers to participate and undertake initial actions, enhancing their levels of ambition over time. DEFRA's aim is for at least 70 percent of farmers, covering at least 70 percent of farmland, to take up SFI agreements. The level of participation will be regarded as a measure of the scheme's success (DEFRA, 2022c). The SFI could, therefore, provide a viable entry point to the ELM scheme, particularly for the majority of current BPS claimants who have little or no experience of AES. It must also be noted that SFI should not be seen in isolation, but rather as an entry-level stage with incremental levels of ambition available for collaboration and landscape-scale benefits available via the “Local Nature Recovery” and “Landscape Recovery” components of ELM. In other words, the three schemes are designed to be complementary.

Farmers remain apprehensive about payment rates and are unconvinced by what is on offer under the SFI scheme (Case, 2021; Triggs, 2022). Farmers express concern about what they see as the many hidden costs associated with committing to new agri-environment initiatives that are not typically recognised in DEFRA's payment rate methodology of “income forgone + cost”. With farmers also losing out from BPS reductions, there are concerns that SFI will not provide enough support during the transition period leading up to the full roll-out of ELM. ELM presents an opportunity to make a policy that will protect the environment, but it also presents risks to farmers and rural communities. According to the National Audit Office (NAO) (2019), 42 percent of farmers would have made a loss in 2014–2015 and 2016–2017 if they had not received Direct Payments, and without adequate support measures, many farm businesses would not be able to survive.

As noted in the Introduction, 20 percent of farmers could go out of business by 2030 as a result of the removal of BPS payments (Clarke, 2021), putting a strain on the industry that is likely to further exacerbate existing mental health issues in the farming community (Younker and Radunovich, 2022).

To achieve the environmental objectives set out in the 25-year Environment Plan and other national targets, ELM and the devolved nation equivalents, need to achieve a high uptake so that the majority of the UK farmland – making up 71 percent of UK land use (NAO, 2021) – is farmed in a sustainable manner. If ELM is not designed in a way that is practical, effective and attractive to farmers, farmers may rely on increased efficiency, production and intensification to make up for their losses in Direct Payments, causing further detriment to the natural environment (EFRA Committee, 2021). Under the CAP, BPS claimants are required to meet “cross-compliance” standards on animal and plant health, the environment, climate change, landscape retention and animal welfare. If farmers do not meet these rules, they face a reduction in their payments; this sanction has played an important role in regulating environmental and animal health and welfare standards. How these protections will be regulated once cross-compliance ends in 2024 remains an open question. Recommendations have been made for a new independent regulator for farming and land management and for more advice and guidance to be made available to change attitudes towards regulation (Marshall *et al.*, 2022). DEFRA is still to set out the details of exactly how it will achieve a lighter-touch approach whilst ensuring environmental regulations are met and the environment is protected. As key conservation charities such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) have highlighted, several regulatory requirements related to hedgerows will cease in 2024, leaving nearly 120,000 km of hedges un-protected (*ibid.*: 42). This makes the development and implementation of DEFRA’s new regulatory and enforcement regime even more pressing.

This ongoing uncertainty on key elements of the policy is unsettling for all stakeholders and is partly a result of how ELM has been developed, including the sequential design and roll out of the different schemes. A key part of this process has been DEFRA’s incorporation of co-design principles and methodologies into the policymaking process. The chapter now turns to outline and assess the application of this form of open policymaking to the development of ELM and situates it within the wider governance literature.

## **The co-design of the environmental land management schemes**

### ***Why co-design?***

In the “Health and Harmony” consultation, DEFRA expressed an intention to learn from the lessons of past schemes and consult with stakeholders on the design and development of new ELM schemes (DEFRA, 2018b). Arguments in favour of “reflexive governance” – defined as “different types of actors, engaging in continuous and iterative processes of learning and readjustment of institutions

and practices” (van der Jagt *et al.*, 2021: 65) – can be traced back to the 1990s when evidence mounted that early environmental policy responses like regulation, market – and coordinative instruments, and policy integration had failed to achieve a “significant and lasting reduction in environmental pollution, resource depletion and destruction of eco-systems” (*ibid.*: 661). In response, new approaches to environmental policy and planning processes were developed, including learning-based governance (De Schutter and Lenoble, 2010), network governance (Rhodes, 1997) and multi-level decision-making (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2007). Transition management, sustainability governance, deliberative democracy for environmental governance and knowledge governance (e.g., global environmental expertise in bodies like the IPCC and the IPBES) are all informed by reflexive governance thinking. Its chief objective is to develop better policies and policy instruments by incorporating the perspectives, values and norms of a variety of actors during the policymaking process (Voß and Kemp, 2006), which has been found to increase the legitimacy and efficiency of governance.

In England, DEFRA’s commitment to “co-design” ELM also needs to be situated in the context of civil service reforms that were aimed at opening up policymaking in Government, with the concept of “open policymaking” being endorsed in the Civil Service Reform Plan of 2012 (HM Government, 2012). “Open policymaking” requires civil servants to improve policymaking by bringing in more views and undertaking innovative, collaborative policy development. This has led to an increase in public engagement exercises and the development of approaches like multi-stakeholder dialogues, deliberative processes, transdisciplinary learning, co-production and co-design. Citizen involvement in government decision-making is hailed to lead to better decisions as a result of reducing uncertainties, policy errors and information asymmetries (Irwin and Wynne, 1996; Blomkamp, 2018). Today, it is common in public services development (especially in the health sector), risk regulation, science and technology innovation (e.g., nanotechnology and synthetic biology) and rural development.

DEFRA has experimented with more “deliberative” research methods in recent years, including the “Citizen Dialogue on bovine TB” and the use of the more participative online engagement app “Citizen Space”, although the department still predominantly relies on more traditional consultative methods such as consultation documents, questionnaires and focus groups (Mitchel *et al.*, 2015). This was the case for the initial development stages of ELM with the release of the “Health and Harmony” consultation and “ELM Policy Discussion Document”, and focus groups held with the ELM Stakeholder Engagement Group. However, DEFRA’s stated intention to “co-design” (see Box 4.2) the scheme with stakeholders marked a step-change in their approach to policy development (DEFRA, 2018b).

The ambitious commitment to co-design ELM was a welcome statement of intent as farmers’ trust and confidence in DEFRA have been historically low (Hall and Pretty, 2008). If implemented in line with the principles of transparency, devolved decision-making and shared ownership of the problems and solutions, co-design offers the opportunity to work in a productive partnership with stakeholders to create a workable and effective policy. However, without careful

### **Box 4.2 The Participatory Approach of “Co-Design”**

Co-design is the active involvement of a diverse range of participants in exploring, developing and experimenting with, as well as testing responses to, shared challenges and concerns. Co-design uses an iterative staged approach where the bigger picture – “discovery” and “inspiration” – is the first phase, which leads to “design” or “ideation”. The ideas are then focussed in on via “delivery” or “implementation” (Blomkamp, 2018; Fox *et al.*, 2018; Tsouvalis and Little, 2019b).

If planned and executed well, a co-design process can lead to the generation of more innovative ideas that ensure that policies and services match the needs of users. Co-design can also help strengthen relationships and build trust and mutual understanding between participants, groups and government (Blomkamp, 2018). Stakeholders are collaborators in the policy design and should be involved in discussions that generate valuable knowledge about the policy problems and solutions likely to work on the ground.

planning and execution, co-design can lead to negative outcomes if the core principles of trust and transparency are not upheld. Stakeholders can become confused and frustrated by the process which can lead to policy fatigue and further erosion of trust.

There are very few examples of co-design being applied to active policy development on this scale, and incorporating this level of complexity. The intentions behind the call to “co-design” very much align with the Brexit narratives of giving a voice back to those who have been marginalised by the powers of the EU (see Heron, in this volume). The extent to which this can be realised in practice will rely on the relative success of DEFRA’s co-design approach and their ability to generate inclusive processes that draw in a wide range of stakeholders.

### ***Tests & trials and co-design components***

The wealth of literature on previous AES development and farmer behaviours indicates that fostering social and cultural capital by facilitating engagement and cooperation between farmers and other stakeholders through activities such as demonstration farms can help to improve engagement in AES (De Krom, 2017). Stakeholder involvement in scheme design can also help to ensure schemes are practical on the ground and are flexible and tailored to farmers needs and circumstances (Tsouvalis and Little, 2019b; Lyon *et al.*, 2020). Part of DEFRA’s commitment to learning from these lessons was the development of the Tests and Trials programme. First established in 2018 and still on-going (DEFRA, 2021c), the programme is a major pillar of DEFRA’s co-design process. The programme

provides funding to farming groups and other organisations to test and trial ideas and elements of the new ELM schemes with farmers and land managers before the policy is fully implemented.

The objective of the Tests and Trials programme is to enable policy thinking to be tested in real-world environments. So far, over 3,000 farmers and land managers have been able to contribute to policy design and ELM scheme development. The Tests and Trials evidence base is grouped into six main themes: “Land Management Plans”, “Advice and Guidance”, “Spatial Prioritisation”, “Collaboration”, “Payments” and “Innovative Delivery Mechanisms”. Tests and Trials provide evidence through progress reports, regular meetings and Thematic Working Group discussions to exchange findings and evidence. The programme has also conducted and facilitated a series of co-design workshops that have engaged 350 farmers and land managers. Tests and Trials are set to continue until 2028, running alongside the pilot programmes and early scheme roll out, with the intention that DEFRA can continue to learn and adapt their policy development.

Outside of Tests and Trials, there is a wider programme of co-design and engagement activities including: an ELM Engagement Group of 30 key stakeholders from farmer representative organisation and environmental charities; external stakeholder events; and a central co-design team that supports and facilitates the development of co-design workshops.

### ***Issues and challenges with DEFRA Co-design***

Whilst research shows that the level of enthusiasm at the beginning of the co-design process was very high – as were the expectations of ELM – this enthusiasm has eroded, and stakeholders have expressed frustration at the process (Aglionby, 2020). Through interviews with various stakeholders involved in the co-design process, research by Tsouvalis *et al.* (2021) has highlighted multiple challenges within DEFRA’s approach, including:

- (i) A lack of shared decision-making and empowering stakeholders to contribute to problem definitions;
- (ii) A lack of ability to share information due to confidentiality;
- (iii) A lack of transparency and feedback on what happens to stakeholder’s contributions in terms of policy development;
- (iv) A lack of detail on the scheme, including proposed approaches, payment rates, advice, baseline measures, the kinds of “outcomes” expected, and monitoring mechanisms; and
- (v) A repetition of themes that participants had already discussed.

Many interviewees observed that the process resembled consultations and focus groups rather than co-design. Participatory approaches like co-design take time if they are to deliver the outcomes they set out to achieve. Research suggests that to date, ELM co-design has been beset by political uncertainties (including a general election in 2019), delays to the Brexit process, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Each of these, in its own way, impacted negatively on the ELM co-design process, leading

to: high staff turnover in DEFRA, which exacerbated engagement difficulties (especially when facilitators of co-design activities had only a limited knowledge of AES and co-design); confidentiality requirements which reduced the ability to share information with participants and hampered progress; and (in relation to the pandemic), the type of engagement activities possible (mainly online). The latter, in particular, prevented DEFRA from reaching certain stakeholder groups, including harder-to-reach farmers, and are discussed in more detail below (Hurley *et al.*, 2020; Lyon *et al.*, 2020; Tsouvalis *et al.*, 2021).

The National Audit Office also reported similar issues with co-design following its evaluation of the process in September 2021. Interviews with the ELM Engagement Group – a group of key agricultural and environmental stakeholders involved in focus groups on ELM policy development – revealed stakeholders were not given a clear indication of how their insights were used in policy development (NAO, 2021). Lack of transparency around the use of stakeholder input as well as policy progress has been a key issue, with the Infrastructure and Projects Authority also raising concerns that, despite the commitment from DEFRA’s Tests and Trials teams, there was a lack of understanding around how the learning has been embedded in agri-environmental policy development (*ibid.*).

### **Inclusivity in co-design**

Inclusivity and widespread engagement are key principles of reflexive governance and co-design. Ensuring that a wide variety of stakeholders are given the opportunity to participate and engage in participatory processes like co-design requires an understanding of the barriers that can prevent people from participating, e.g., language, location, time commitments, disabilities or impairments, and technology access and ability. An effective communications and engagement strategy is also a prerequisite for ensuring that a wide range of stakeholders, including those that are harder to reach, are aware of and given the opportunity to take part in co-design.

#### ***Engaging harder-to-reach stakeholders in elm co-design***

“Harder to reach” stakeholders are an especially important consideration in ELM co-design. The term refers to people that can be more challenging to contact or engage with and who are, therefore, often omitted from research- and policymaking endeavours. They are also often underserved by extension services (Lyon *et al.*, 2020). The terminology has been used in a variety of scenarios including social marketing, medicine, the public sector, and research (Brackertz, 2007; Bonevski *et al.*, 2014). Whilst stakeholders may be harder to reach due to practical, personal, or attitudinal barriers (Hurley *et al.*, 2020; Lyon *et al.*, 2020), they can also be underserved due to the inaccessibility of an organisation or because they are simply ignored and marginalised from the public discourse. In short, it might be the organisations and public institutions (rather than the stakeholders) that are harder to reach.



As a result of the common perceptions that harder-to-reach stakeholders require more time, resources and money to engage with, attempts are not even made to include them in engagement processes (Khanal *et al.*, 2019; Stringer *et al.*, 2020). Hurley *et al.* (2022) indicate that there are many types of farmers and land managers who might be harder to reach in the context of ELM, facing different barriers to engagement.

Barriers include a digital divide due to poor rural connectivity restricting engagement with online consultation exercises and digital-by-default AES, with some farmers “having to drive to McDonalds to access wi-fi” (Hurley *et al.*, 2020). While internet access has improved in recent years, rural internet connectivity still lags behind urban areas. Whereas only 1 percent of UK urban homes and businesses are unable to receive a reliable fixed network broadband connection, this rises to 10 percent of rural homes and businesses (Ofcom, 2020). When it comes to the speed of internet connection rural areas have a significantly lower average speed (52 Mbit/s download speed) compared to urban areas (74 Mbit/s download speed) and rural areas are also lagging behind in updates to ultrafast broadband; 65 percent of UK urban homes have access to speeds of over 300 Mbit/s compared to only 20 percent of rural homes (Ofcom, 2020).

Improvements have been made in recent years, and the UK government has committed to improving rural access (Sellick, 2021). However, engagement on agricultural policy is currently operating on a principally “digital by default” basis, potentially rendering a proportion of the farming community unable to engage and at risk of being left behind during this transition period. The Covid-19 pandemic poses additional challenges as many of the ELM interactions were only conducted online. Whilst going online overcomes some geographical and time restrictive limitations to engagement, it exacerbates the issue of the “digital divide”. As well as the access to suitable internet, connectivity issues surrounding access to correct hardware, software as well as confidence and ability with technology can also increase the digital divide (see, also, Gerli and Whalley in this volume).

Other important reasons why many farmers are hard for DEFRA to reach include farmers’ lack of trust in DEFRA due to past experiences; scheme bureaucracy; lack of obvious benefits of engagement; and a lack of time (Hurley *et al.*, 2020; Lyon *et al.*, 2021). Certain types of farmers, such as tenant farmers who find AES contracts difficult to navigate; pig and chicken farmers who have not been claimants of BPS before and smaller farmers who may have less time and capacity to engage, can also be left behind in policy discourse (Hurley *et al.*, 2020; White *et al.*, 2021).

Hurley *et al.* (2022) suggest that upland farmers, in particular, could be hard to reach due to the geography of the upland areas contributing to social isolation (Holt and Morris, 2020). Further, while upland farmers have relied heavily on Direct Payments from the CAP to ensure their business remain viable (DEFRA, 2018b), research shows that AES have actually reduced the stability of income for upland livestock farmers in less favourable areas (Harkness *et al.*, 2021). This could suggest that AES have been less accessible or well suited to these

challenging environments. This makes it all the more important to ensure that upland farmers are engaged and participating in co-design activities to prevent their farm businesses from becoming marginalised by the changing agricultural policy.

### ***Engaging a broader range of stakeholders in ELM co-design***

Reay (2020) advocates for a high level of engagement with rural communities to ensure that the multiple social, ecological and environmental implications of this substantive shift in rural policy are navigated in a way that results in a “just transition”. Broadening the stakeholder landscape of ELM out further, Coulson and Milbourne (2022) argue that it is important to look beyond the “usual suspects” in developing post-Brexit agri-food policy and to meaningfully include diverse groups, actors and knowledges in deliberations over the future of food, land and agricultural policy in the UK.

Agricultural policy today has to meet multiple objectives, linked to the environment, food security, public health and many other complex and sometimes competing demands. It has to address problems where farming is both a cause and a potential solution: environmental degradation, climate change, resource depletion and biodiversity loss. Policymaking here takes place in a highly political space which includes many stakeholders. It is important that ELM co-design pays attention to the diversity and interrelatedness of these overlapping concerns. DEFRA’s participatory landscape has, until now, been rather narrow and chiefly focussed on the “usual suspects”. There is a need here to “ecologise” participation in ELM-co-design; Chilvers and Kearnes (2020) describe the process of participatory endeavours being attentive to diverse collectives and their interactions in wider issues and systems. At the same time, it follows that there is a need to broaden the issues ELM has addressed to date. According to the Sustainable Food and Farming (SFFS) White Paper, published in 2020 by ten agri-environment stakeholders in response to the lack of progress by ELM co-design at the time, it would be a mistake for DEFRA to “simply to introduce another AES within a self-contained silo without consideration of productivity, profitability, resilience, volatility, supply chain fairness, food security and international trade” (SFFS, 2020: 3). Calls made for the “politicisation” of agricultural policy (Feindt *et al.*, 2020) lend further weight to the fact that pursuing agricultural policymaking in isolation has outlived its usefulness. DEFRA should think carefully about who has been overlooked in ELM co-design and how their views could be captured. What infrastructures of participation would these publics need to participate in ELM co-design? And how could the process be more inclusive?

### ***Potential consequences of a failure to engage***

Direct engagement with farmers has been hampered by Covid-19 but also by a lack of communication and transparency from DEFRA about the ELM schemes. This could have been a factor in the low response rate from farmers for the SFI

pilot; DEFRA expected a response of between 5,000 and 10,000 farmers but only received an expression of interest from 2,178 (NAO, 2021) with the final number of pilot participants being closer to 1,000. Concerns have already been raised about the low participation of small farms and the continued vulnerability of tenant farmers whose (frequently short-term) tenancy agreements may preclude them from adopting new public money for public goods schemes (Coulson and Milbourne, 2022). The low level of uptake of the SFI pilot could be indicative of an overall lack of interest in ELM which could be detrimental to participation. Low participation will have implications for the delivery of environmental goals and could have far-reaching social and economic consequences for the sustainability of those farm businesses that are most dependent on payments for the stability of their income. Their omission could also lead to a bias in the policy landscape – an over-representation of those that are more willing and/or able to engage (the “usual suspects”) and an underrepresentation of those deemed “harder to reach” (Bonevski *et al.*, 2014).

This presents risks to the post-Brexit policy landscape because the “usual suspects” can exert power over the decision-making process to “shape what knowledge is legitimised, which regional issues are validated and how farming is perceived within governance deliberations” Coulson and Milbourne (2022: 131). This is particularly dangerous if the policy framework presents a mismatch between ambitious environmental targets and the social and economic sustainability of elements of the agricultural sector in certain rural communities. Reay (2020) presents this as a key challenge in reconciling the trade-offs between reaching Net Zero by 2050 and maintaining the viability of rural communities. Both Reay (*ibid.*) and Coulson and Milbourne (2022) call for extensive and diverse engagement with rural communities to fully understand the implications of the transition to sustainable farming.

Failure to conduct successful and inclusive ELM co-design could negatively impact on:

- (i) **Service/policy users** – Who lack access to services they need and consequently may become “left behind” by society; agricultural businesses that may receive limited support; and for farmers and rural communities that may be disadvantaged under the change in policy.
- (ii) **Policy design** – Bias in the data can lead to an inaccurate representation of a policy area and a false perception of a threat or problem (Bonevski *et al.*, 2014), in turn, leading to inadequate solutions to policy issues and poorly designed policy, such as a lack of viable options for tenant or upland farmers.
- (iii) **Institutional reputation** – If the policy design does not account for the needs of a wide variety of stakeholders and is badly executed, the policy could fail to achieve its goals and impact negatively on stakeholders and the environment, thereby damaging DEFRA’s reputation and further eroding trust in the institution.

- (iv) **The environment** – The failure of ELM co-design could have detrimental effects on the environment due to a limited uptake of ELM schemes and environmental policy objectives not being met and/or an intensification of farming to maintain a viable business after the reduction/loss of subsidies, with further negative consequences for nature and the climate.

## Conclusions

The UK's decision to leave the EU and the Common Agricultural Policy represents a potentially seismic and progressive shift towards a more environmentally sustainable mode of farming. In England, and to varying extents across the devolved nations, there is a clear move towards a system of paying “public money for public goods”; this could contribute towards achieving ambitious biodiversity and Net Zero targets – including reducing the industry's own greenhouse gas emissions (10 percent of the UK total) – and delivering against the government's 25 Year Environment Plan. Whilst the promises of the new ELM schemes are highly encouraging, full details of the design and delivery are still being developed and will be released through until 2028. Currently, the lack of detail on the full breadth of the schemes is a concern to farmers and land managers and the financial sustainability of the industry post-Brexit remains uncertain. Important elements of the policy are still to be announced, including how the compliance, regulation and enforcement mechanisms of the CAP will be reimaged under a new domestic governance structure. Whilst the development of ELM offers opportunities in terms of redressing some of the negative implications of the CAP, it poses difficult questions around how the new policy will simultaneously deliver ecological, economic and social sustainability. Achieving a just transition towards an agricultural policy that delivers on environmental benefits without negatively impacting on already marginal communities will be a complex undertaking. Early projections of the impact of the transition from BPS to ELM indicate that a likely outcome will be the loss of farm businesses with wider implications for affected rural communities.

In order to navigate the complexity involved in “taking back control” of agricultural policy, DEFRA has undertaken to employ elements of reflexive governance in the form of co-design. Opening out deliberations and discussions on the future of how agriculture should be governed very much fits with the association of Brexit with a repatriation of power and a renewed agency for landowners and rural communities outlined in Chapter 3 (Heron) in this volume. Proponents of co-design point to its potential as a democratising force that enables the generation of more effective policy through the integration of ideas, solutions and challenges from the people who will be affected by the policy, ultimately leading to more legitimate and efficient governance. As this chapter has illustrated, the promise of reflexivity and inclusivity, as applied to the ELM policy experiment, has been limited by a lack of transparency in how the co-design process

has informed policy development – which brings into question the legitimacy of the decisions made – and a continued reliance on the “usual suspects”, which may overlook the implications of policy changes for more marginal communities. Without engaging the “harder-to-reach” in the co-design process, a full assessment of potential repercussions and unintended consequences of the new policy landscape will not be possible.

At this critical moment in the generation of new governance structures and the realignment of agricultural policy towards a “payment for public goods” model, important questions remain on how farm businesses will respond and the extent to which some in the industry will be “left behind” or choose not to engage. The ELM schemes will play an important role in helping the UK to deliver environmental targets such as net zero, but close monitoring will be required to understand the distributional impacts of the policy (economic, social and ecological), focussing most closely on those sectors and geographical regions that may be most at risk of negative outcomes during and beyond the transition.

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# 5 Governing the UK agri-food system post-Brexit

*Adrienne Attorp and Carmen Hubbard*

## Introduction

There are growing societal concerns about how food is produced and the impact of producing food on the environment, and on people who work in the agri-food sector. Producers worldwide are increasingly being challenged to improve the sustainability of their businesses (Hubbard et al., 2020). However, achieving sustainability is difficult as it requires an integrated approach and the consideration of trade-offs between its three pillars: social (people), economic performance and environmental (planet) (Purvis et al., 2019), all of which are interwoven and cannot be separated from each other (Arora-Jonsson, 2013). The degree to which such an approach is achieved depends on the ability of actors within the food system to come together and reach compromise.

Following its exit from the EU, the UK is, for the first time in nearly 50 years, responsible for developing its own agri-food and environmental policies. Achieving 'sustainability' is a key policy goal (DEFRA, 2018a, 2018b; DAERA, 2021; Food Standards Scotland, 2021). However, the debate about which aspects of sustainability should be prioritised is heated and polarised, and the UK's highly fragmented policymaking environment makes achieving consensus across the four nations difficult. This challenge is compounded by the fact that regional goals for the future direction of the UK agri-food sector do not necessarily align with each other, nor with the UK government's post-Brexit vision of the country as a liberal, free-market player on the international trade stage.

This chapter considers some of the challenges the UK faces in moving towards a more 'sustainable' food system post-Brexit. Drawing on theories of governance, it aims to shed light on the ways different actors in the UK food system interact with this debate and shape policy. It first summarises what 'sustainable' food systems are, and general challenges faced in governing these. It then examines these challenges in the post-Brexit UK context by outlining the UK food governance apparatus and the actors within it, and discussing some of the specific issues this presents in achieving a sustainable food system outside the EU.

### (Sustainable) food systems

The term ‘food system’ is a complex and multi-dimensional concept that has no universal definition. To date, the literature reveals multiple perspectives. For example, Ericksen (2008, pp. 234–235) defines a food system broadly as comprising activities ranging from production to consumption, involving “...the interactions between and within biogeophysical and human environments, which determine the activities themselves ... [and the] outcomes of the activities (contributions to food security, environmental security, and social welfare) and other determinants of food security”. Both Fanzo et al. (2020) and the OECD (2021) similarly define food systems as being made up of not just human actors, but also all institutions, environments, infrastructure and activities related to food production (from primary production through to consumption). Capone et al. (2014) stress the overlap of food systems with agricultural systems at global, national and regional level, highlighting the key role of and the interactions between the actors within the system. They also reinforce the link between food security and food sustainability. Adopting the work of Ericksen (2008), and in line with Capone et al. (2014), Eakin et al. (2017) reemphasise the link between food systems and food security, pointing out that achieving food sustainability is one of the key challenges of the 21st century.

Despite these various definitions, a common occurring theme is that any food system is expected to ensure food security, that is, “when all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (UN FAO, 2012). This should be achieved within a ‘sustainable’ food system that uses resources with care, supports healthy ecosystems and good animal welfare, promotes fairness amongst actors within the system, and provides goods and services that meet the needs and desires of current society, without jeopardising those of future generations (UN FAO, 2012). However, while food security may be the principal outcome of any food system, it is clear that food systems are simultaneously integrated social and ecological systems. Hence, the role played by various institutions in intermediating processes and resources between these systems is important.

In achieving a ‘sustainable’ food system, a key challenge for governments is to determine how best to balance the competing priorities and trade-offs associated with food production. Alongside determining how to meet food security needs, there are also multiple, sometimes contradictory policy channels to consider (Barling et al., 2002; Candel et al., 2016; Kuhmonen, 2018; Milbourne and Coulson, 2021). For example, there is a clear need for farmers to produce sufficient food at competitive prices, but also a parallel and competing need to mitigate agriculture-related environmental degradation. There are also concerns about, *inter alia*, the promotion of ‘healthy’ diets, treatment of workers within the food system, preserving a countryside that people are culturally attached to, and maintaining a vibrant rural community.

Many of these challenges, and others associated with food production, are what Churchman (1967) and Rittel and Webber (1973) call ‘wicked’: they can neither be understood nor addressed in isolation, and solving one food production ‘problem’ generally creates others (Candel, 2014; Candel et al., 2016; Kuhmonen, 2018). Therefore, there is no one ‘solution’ to the multiple, intersecting problems associated with the ways in which we feed ourselves, and solutions that are presented are often fiercely contested (Barling et al., 2002; Candel et al., 2016). Moreover, it is difficult, if not impossible, to maximise all desired outcomes simultaneously – each of which is critical to achieving at least one aspect of sustainability (environmental, social, economic). Trade-offs need to be considered, which can create conflict among food system actors. This situation is further complicated by policy gaps produced by competing policy channels – gaps that different interests can take advantage of to maintain or improve their relative position. Theories of governance can help explain some of the complexities inherent in navigating these trade-offs. They also facilitate an understanding of how actors interact within the policymaking arena to influence policy outcomes.

### ***Governing food systems***

Food governance has been defined as “the formal and informal interactions across scales between public and/or private entities ultimately aiming at the realization of food availability, food access, and food utilization, and their stability over time” (Candel, 2014, p. 598). The agri-food system comprises a complex, often disconnected network of actors (e.g., input suppliers, primary producers, processors, consumers, politicians, civil society actors, among others) with diverse and frequently competing interests, responsibilities and decision-making abilities (Díaz-Méndez and Lozano-Cabedo, 2020). Power relationships among said actors are often unequal (Marsden, 2013; Pereira and Drimie, 2016; Díaz-Méndez and Lozano-Cabedo, 2020).

Within the UK and the European Union (EU), the agri-food sector has historically been treated as ‘exceptional’, in governance terms (Cox et al., 1985; Grant, 1995; Skogstad, 1998). Exceptionalist policy approaches occur where a sector is perceived to contribute significantly to the delivery of societal benefits (Daugbjerg and Feindt, 2017). In agriculture, it is believed that state intervention is warranted due to the sector being different from most other economic sectors: agricultural producers face unpredictable natural and economic risks, and agriculture is seen to contribute to broader national interests such as food security and maintenance of ‘the countryside’ (Skogstad, 1998; Daugbjerg and Swinbank, 2012; Daugbjerg and Feindt, 2017). As part of this exceptionalist approach, a relatively closed network of farm ministries and powerful farm groups was traditionally responsible for developing agriculture policies (Smith, 1990; Woods, 2005; Daugbjerg and Feindt, 2017; Keating, 2018).

Increasingly, there is a shift away from agricultural exceptionalism in policy-making. Although the agri-food sector remains important, agriculture is no longer only about food and fibre production. The role of agriculture as ‘multifunctional’

(a widely accepted concept developed by the OECD, 2001) – that is, providing non-commodity outputs such as public goods – is a central research and policy focus (Persson, 2007; Marsden and Sonnino, 2008; Renting et al., 2009; Daugbjerg and Feindt, 2017; Keating, 2018). There is also an expansion of actors who are active within the sector, including processors, suppliers, retailers, NGOs and consumers/consumer organizations (Ingram et al., 2013; Lawrence et al., 2015; Benoit and Patsias, 2017; Tosun, 2017; McCarthy et al., 2018; Díaz-Méndez and Lozano-Cabedo, 2020).

Power distributions among actors within the sector are changing as a result of this expansion. However, the inclusion of a broader range of actors does not necessarily result in equal power sharing among them. Rather, the expansion typically leads to strategic positioning of individuals or partners (Skogstad, 1998). In recent decades, retail corporations and food processors have assumed an increasingly privileged position globally as they integrate food systems and occupy political and economic leadership roles (Clapp and Fuchs, 2009; Attorp and McAreavey, 2020; Díaz-Méndez and Lozano-Cabedo, 2020). Many argue that because of this concentration of control in corporate hands, existing food governance systems are no longer fit for purpose due to questions of legitimacy, power, resources and interactions of relevant actors (Clapp and Fuchs, 2009; Hinrichs, 2014; Attorp and McAreavey, 2020). Further, as Díaz-Méndez and Lozano-Cabedo (2020) argue, the shift away from ‘traditional’ (i.e., exceptional) forms of agri-food governance has created friction among actors in the agri-food system. As the rights and responsibilities of existing actors have changed, and new actors have become involved, it is increasingly difficult to reach a consensus on what a ‘sustainable’ food system looks like and how to achieve it.

As the UK charts a new path for agri-environmental policy outside of the EU, the challenge of reaching a consensus on how to achieve sustainability in its food system has been brought into sharp relief. Both Brexit and the fragmented nature of agri-environmental policymaking in the UK further complicate an already difficult process. The remainder of this chapter considers this challenge in further detail.

## **Governing the UK food system**

When the UK joined the EU (then the European Economic Community [EEC]) in 1973, the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) became the central policy underpinning agri-environmental governance in the country. Launched in 1962, the CAP was an exemplar of agricultural exceptionalism, originally aiming to support an increase in food production, stabilise markets, ensure food security, and secure a fair standard of living for farmers and reasonable prices for consumers. These were goals achieved through a set of market support measures, such as price support for certain products such as milk, cereals, beef and oil seeds; storage and withdrawals of surplus products when prices were considered too low; and export subsidies. But market intervention, particularly price support and import taxes, led to over-production, and food surpluses, not shortages,

became the problem. To this, issues such as food safety, environmental damage, declining farmers' standard of living (as real farm income dropped), and conflicts between member states were added to the EEC's concerns. Moreover, it is widely accepted that because of its protectionist and trade-distorting stance, the CAP was detrimental to world prices, thereby affecting the livelihood of millions of poor farmers around the globe.

In response to these challenges, the CAP underwent significant reform. First, in the 1980s, under ongoing pressure from the World Trade Organisation, there began a shift away from legislating protectionist tariffs and price supports towards offering farmers support via less market-distorting measures. Additionally, following the release of the 1988 'Future of Rural Society' report (European Communities Commission, 1988), support for environmental and rural development measures was included. Since then, the focus of the CAP has increasingly been placed on the latter (Harvey, 2015; Swinbank, 2017), with the concept of agriculture as 'multifunctional' underpinning this approach (O'Connor and Dunne, 2009; Renting et al., 2009).<sup>1</sup>

Today, outside the EU, the UK is no longer legally required to adhere to CAP regulations. A degree of regulatory alignment with the bloc will likely continue to be necessary, given that it remains the UK's largest trading partner and will be for some time. However, as detailed in Chapter 4 of this volume, the UK government<sup>2</sup> is set to shift policy focus nearly entirely away from farm income support (CAP direct payments) to the delivery of environmental outcomes, with farmers expected to be rewarded for the provision of public goods. What it means for the UK food system to be 'sustainable' is changing, along with the way the UK food system is regulated.

The exact nature of this transformation is currently subject to lively debate, and reaching a consensus is difficult for multiple reasons. First, current agri-environmental policymaking is complicated and fragmented. Responsibilities for developing policy and regulating activities within the food system are spread across multiple departments and agencies within central government and across the UK's devolved nations. Further, actors within the UK food system do not necessarily share a common vision for the future of the food system and how best to achieve 'sustainability' within it. The policymaking environment has also become increasingly complex as an understanding of the 'wicked' problems associated with food production has grown, and the expectations about what agriculture should deliver have expanded. To understand what this means for the future of agri-environmental governance, it is, therefore, important that attention is paid to who is influencing policy, and how. If certain actors are afforded disproportionate influence, policy outcomes can be ineffective and are unlikely to be 'sustainable'. These challenges are discussed in turn below.

### ***One food system, many government agencies***

The policymaking environment in the UK is complex and fragmented, particularly as it relates to food system governance. Like elsewhere in the EU in the

mid-late 20th century, UK agri-environmental policymaking was centralised and ‘exceptionalist’ (Smith, 1990; Wales et al., 2006). But in the 1990s, the BSE crisis, changes in the CAP, a change in government (the beginning of the ‘New Labour’ era) and a move towards devolution provided grounds for a “radical shift in divisions of government responsibility” (Wales et al., 2006, p. 189). An ‘arms-length’ mode of governance emerged and UK agri-environmental policymaking became de-centralised and diversified.

There is a tradition of arms-length regulation in the UK, and there are multiple arguments for distancing public sector bodies from politics: it can help depoliticise decision-making, it affords agencies the freedom to focus on areas that might otherwise be low-priority within government, and can allow the government to more easily access external skills and expertise (Gash et al., 2010). However, there are concerns about this model, including – most relevant to arguments made in this chapter – the claim that an ‘arms-length body’ (ALB) system is highly complex and confusing (Gash et al., 2010; Freeguard, 2016; Parsons, 2020). This can create a highly fragmented approach to policymaking.

Parsons (2020) highlights that, within England, there are currently 16<sup>3</sup> separate governmental bodies (including executive agencies, non-ministerial departments and ALBs) responsible for governing different elements of England’s food system. And there are further complexities within these. For example, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), the key ministerial department responsible for food and the environment in England and Wales, currently relies on more than 30 agencies and public bodies to administer its remit (Freeguard, 2016; UK Government, 2021). Examples of these include the Forestry Commission, the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, the Environment Agency and the Drinking Water Inspectorate. Responsibilities are not always clearly defined among these, with overlap in responsibilities evident.

Parsons (2021) argues that, in some cases, this fragmented approach to policymaking can cause ‘policy disconnects’, which can result in the development of ineffective policies and hamper policymakers’ ability to tackle complex and systemic problems, such as those clearly present in the food system. For example, in a review of food policy in England, Parsons (2021) identifies 14 key areas that lack coherence, including food supply chain policy, trade, climate change and hunger. Identified disconnects range from administrative and structural ones, such as departmental demarcations or failures in communication, to more fundamental ones, such as “...underlying (potentially ideological) tensions between food policy goals” or the omission (or exclusion) of “...important food system impacts [...] from the food policy agenda” (Parsons, 2021, p. 23). The latter raises questions about policy priorities and the power different actors hold and underscores the reality that political choices are inherent in addressing food system challenges (Parsons, 2021). Lack of cohesion and communication results in administrative inconsistencies that powerful actors can exploit to advance their interests, an issue returned to below.



***Agri-environment policy: a devolved competency***

Adding to this complexity is the fact that agri-environmental policy is a devolved competency within the UK, meaning each of the UK's devolved nations has some autonomy in determining how to best support its agri-food sector. Pre-Brexit this meant that devolved governments had independence in deciding how to apply CAP regulations in their jurisdiction. Post-Brexit they will continue to have autonomy in deciding how to support their respective agriculture sectors, including the ability to develop their own agri-environmental policies.

This arrangement reflects the different needs and goals of agriculture sectors across the UK, something McAreavey highlights in Chapter 2. The socio-political and geographical contexts for food production vary widely across the country's devolved nations. Agriculture (i.e., primary production) is relatively more important in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales than it is in England, both socially and economically. For example, while it accounts for only 0.6 percent of Gross Valued Added (GVA) and 1.1 percent of employment in England, in Northern Ireland the corresponding figures are 1.4 percent and 5.8 percent (Gravey et al., 2017). In Scotland, agriculture's contribution accounts for 0.8 percent of GVA and 2.5 percent of employment (Scottish Government, 2019).

The types of agriculture that can take place, and the economic viability of these, also differ across the country. Farms in England tend to be larger and more productive than elsewhere in the UK, with production centred on arable, horticultural and intensive livestock enterprises. These are relatively more profitable and less dependent on subsidy than enterprises in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland, which are typically more extensive and livestock-based (Coleman, 2017; Greer, 2017; Keating, 2018). While, in England, the contribution of CAP direct payments to the average farm business income (FBI) accounts for 61 percent, in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland it is 87, 80 and 75 percent respectively (Gravey, 2017; Greer, 2017; Keating, 2018). However, the share of direct payments varies significantly across farm types. Whereas poultry and horticulture farms depend very little on these payments (less than 10 percent of FBI), grazing livestock (beef and sheep) farms are almost totally dependent (over 90 percent) on them (DEFRA, 2021).

There are multiple reasons for these differences. First, there are climatic and topographical considerations. Only 17 percent of land in England is classified as 'areas of natural constraint',<sup>4</sup> whereas this figure is 70 percent in Northern Ireland, 81 percent in Wales and 85 percent in Scotland (Greer, 2017; Keating, 2018). This means it is often easier to produce food and fibre at competitive market prices in England than it is elsewhere in the UK. Historical and socio-political contexts also vary widely. For example, in Northern Ireland, a pattern of extensive, small-scale landholdings is rooted in a historical struggle for the right to own land, grounded in socio-political conflict and the fight for political independence from Britain (Foster, 1988; Lee, 1989; Hannan and Commins, 1992). The social and political importance of family-owned smallholdings persists today, meaning that agriculture is more likely to receive political and policy support in Northern Ireland than it is in England (Attorp, 2021).

Moving forward, the discrepancies in farm support could create tensions among UK farmers. However, as the amount of money to be allocated to farming still lies with Westminster, the devolved governments may find themselves constrained on how they can use their own budget (Hubbard, 2020). Against this background, perceptions of what constitutes a sustainable food system looks like may differ across the UK's four nations. What kind of agriculture should be supported, and the exact nature of that support, is a contested matter, and developing agri-environmental policies that account for these divergent needs is a challenge complicated by the UK's policy environment. Brexit has brought this issue into sharp relief.

### ***Devolved versus reserved policies: conflicting goals***

Although devolved nations have the right to develop agri-environmental policies that suit their specific needs post-Brexit, their ability to do so is constrained by the UK and international law. As Dobbs (2022, p. 19) details, Westminster retains parliamentary and budgetary sovereignty and can, where it considers it “necessary or expedient”, act to, for example, ensure legal coherency across the UK, protect the UK's internal market, or facilitate international trade deals. The UK's fully reserved trade policy is likely to place particular constraint on the devolved nations' ability to pursue their own agri-environmental policies (Gravey and Whitten, 2021; Dobbs, 2022). It is outside the scope of this chapter to discuss this conflict in detail, although various authors provide overviews of the range of issues faced as the new UK–EU relationship is developing (e.g., Burns et al., 2016; Diamand, 2017; Gravey, 2017; Gravey et al., 2017; House of Lords, 2017; Burns et al., 2018; Keating, 2018; Jordan and Moore, 2020; Gravey and Whitten, 2021).

The devolved nations' freedom to develop their own agri-environmental policies is further constrained by international law (e.g., the UK's commitments under the Paris Climate Agreement and the World Trade Organisation's Agreement on Agriculture) and the new UK–EU relationship (Gravey and Whitten, 2021; Dobbs, 2022). This is particularly the case for Northern Ireland, which, under the Northern Ireland Protocol, is legally obliged to maintain regulatory alignment with the European Union (UK Cabinet Office, 2021). The protocol aims to avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland (something which is imperative in protecting the 1998 Good Friday Agreement<sup>5</sup>) and preserve the integrity of the EU's single market while simultaneously maintaining unfettered access to trade in goods between NI and Great Britain (NIDIRECT, 2021). As a result, Northern Ireland (but not the rest of the UK) effectively remains in the EU's single market for goods, thereby allowing goods to move between Northern Ireland, Ireland and the rest of Europe without customs checks or tariffs. By extension, Northern Ireland must continue to apply EU rules in this domain and remains under the supervision of EU institutions for compliance with relevant rules<sup>6</sup> (Gravey and Whitten, 2021; NIDIRECT, 2021). Included in this are rules pertaining to the environment and agri-food standards.

In short, the complex and fragmented nature of the UK's regulatory environment makes the already difficult challenge of regulating food production's 'wicked problems' even more sticky. The UK's exit from the EU has compounded this. Ongoing negotiations surrounding policy arrangements dictating the relationship between the UK and the EU will introduce multiple new competing policy channels and complicate existing ones. This will likely increase the number of policy gaps that different actors can use to advance their own interests. To understand the potential implications of this dynamic, it is important to examine the actors involved. Therefore, we provide a brief overview of central actors in the UK food system, before concluding with a discussion of how their influence may impact food system governance in the post-Brexit era.

### **Actors in the UK food system: an overview**

The range of actors involved in the UK agri-food sector has grown in recent decades, as it has globally. Alongside this, power distributions within the UK food system have changed. As discussed above, in the late 20th century, UK and EU agri-food policymaking was controlled by a handful of powerful farm ministries and farm groups. As a result, policy focused mainly on supporting primary producers.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, supermarkets became increasingly dominant players in the UK food provisioning system and began integrating the food supply chain in an unprecedented way (Wales et al., 2006). This, alongside the aforementioned shift towards arms-length agri-food governance in the UK, helped transfer power away from primary producers towards retailers. As supermarkets are highly sensitive to consumer behaviour, this trend shifted power closer to the consumer as well (Wales et al., 2006). Since then, retailer power has become even further concentrated. Although there are currently ten large food retailers in the UK, only three of these account for 42 percent of market share<sup>7</sup> (Hasnain et al., 2020). Ninety-eight percent of British shoppers use a supermarket or hypermarket for their grocery shopping (IDG, 2020, *in* Hasnain et al., 2020).

Alongside this, as public awareness and concern about environmental and social issues grow, both government and the agri-food industry are under increasing pressure to be seen to be doing something about food production's negative impacts. Recent decades have seen significant growth in the number and influence of civil society organisations involved in food governance (Candel, 2014; Moragues-Faus, 2017). Campaigns, often led by such organisations, have resulted in influential trends such as 'plant-based' eating, and have helped force issues like climate change onto the agri-food policy agenda. The influence wielded by these organisations reflects the increase in power afforded to consumers in general as retailers have become central players in food supply chains.

Food supply chain integration has also afforded processors great power and influence. In an increasingly globalised, competitive food system, many industries remain economically viable by intensifying. Often, this means moving towards a vertically integrated production model under which growers share costs and risks

of production with the integrator, i.e., a corporate food processor (Weis, 2007; Winders and Ransom, 2019).<sup>3</sup> In such a system, power typically resides with the processor. As will be discussed further below, this trend may increase as the UK moves towards a more free-market-oriented trade regime post-Brexit.

This does not mean that UK farmers no longer have power. Agricultural landscapes retain strong social and cultural importance in the UK, and farmers are still considered the most 'legitimate' custodians of the countryside (Daugbjerg and Feidnt, 2017; Attorp, 2021). That they will continue to be subsidised with public money to manage land in the UK is evidence of this. However, the 'farming lobby' no longer has the influence it once had. Control of supply chains lies with retailers and processors, and the interests of consumers typically take precedent over those of producers. Moreover, in many cases, public subsidies that maintain many farming enterprises on the land are indirectly being captured by processors further down the supply chain, who benefit from not having to pay suppliers the full cost of the food and fibre they produce.

It is important to note that these trends are not uniform across the UK. Because of differences in production systems and socio-political situations across the country, power distributions among actors differ somewhat in the devolved nations. Nevertheless, trends outlined here can be at least somewhat generalised. The main point is that, while the UK food system was once governed by a small, closed network of actors concerned mainly with supporting primary producers, the network has now become more diverse, and power has shifted within it. By extension, expectations about how the UK food system should operate and what it should deliver have changed. This has implications for what a 'sustainable' UK food system looks like and how it is achieved.

### **Governing the UK food system post-Brexit: how can food sustainability be achieved?**

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, sustainability is commonly considered to comprise three 'pillars': social, economic and environmental (Purvis et al., 2019). Although there are multiple definitions of sustainable food systems, most account for all three pillars in some fashion. They also share a focus on food security. Therefore, it can be concluded that, for a food system to be truly sustainable, it must account for all these elements. As Parsons (2021) argues, when designing policies, the omission of any element or component of a sustainable food system is likely to impede the achievement of sustainability. Such omissions are more likely to occur when certain actors within the system are afforded disproportionate influence.

The current direction of travel for UK agri-environmental policymaking, in which a shift towards 'public money for public (environmental) goods' is evident, makes clear that both free-market principles and the environmental aspects of sustainability are a central policy focus for UK policymakers. Given the many environmental challenges associated with food production, this is arguably positive. However, Dobbs (2022, p. 24) argues that government objectives are "skewing

the approach to sustainability [...] towards environmental sustainability". For example, she highlights that the initial 2018 Agriculture Bill "did not address food quality, food security, public health and other social objectives" (p. 24).

The 2020 Agriculture Act addresses some of these issues to a certain extent. For example, the government has a duty to report to Parliament on UK food security; a multi-annual financial assistance plan must be prepared at least once every five years; and within the bill, there are provisions for increases in productivity, transparency and fairness in the supply chain, and assistance during exceptional market conditions (Hubbard, 2020; UK Parliament, 2020). However, the Act still fails to account for broader social objectives, and it lacks any reference to the quality and safety standards of future imported food (Hubbard, 2020). Clearly, not all elements of sustainability have been accounted for. This raises questions about the ability of the UK government's strategy to achieve food security and food sustainability more generally, and about who benefits from the strategy. We consider some of these here.

### ***Food security***

The UK has not been threatened by food insecurity since the Second World War. The country currently produces approximately 60 percent of its own food (Lang, 2020), and its food imports come mainly from suppliers who are very stable economically and politically (mostly, EU member states). New trade deals signed with Japan, Australia and New Zealand aim to reinforce this (Hubbard, 2020). Thus, it can be argued that, even if Brexit results in less food being produced in the UK and more being imported from elsewhere, the threat of food insecurity remains low. However, recent logistical supply chain problems, including significant labour shortages in horticulture, meat processing and logistics, have exposed weaknesses in the current provisioning system (Barbulescu et al., 2021; DEFRA, 2021; Holmes, 2021).

The UK relies on a just-in-time (JIT) food supply system, whereby necessary items in the supply chain arrive just when they are needed (Hasnain et al., 2020). This system is a product of the vertical integration that has occurred as supermarkets and processors have gained dominance in the food provisioning system. A JIT system's chief benefit is increased efficiency along the supply chain, achieved by keeping inventories low. This reduces costs related to storage and labour, and limits spoilage, as produce is not usually left sitting around for long periods (Lai and Cheng, 2009). However, as Hasnain et al. (2020) write, such systems "...are at the mercy of even minor disruptions where the impacts flow through and magnify on their journey". Further, cost savings are not evenly distributed among actors involved in food production; they are mainly accrued by actors towards the end of the supply chain, e.g., processors and retailers.

Although integrated JIT supply chains confer obvious advantages, many argue that over-reliance on them may compromise UK food security in the long run as factors such as geo-political instability and climate change make global supply chains increasingly volatile (Garnett et al., 2020; Hasnain et al., 2020;

Lang, 2020). Additionally, because they are controlled by, and primarily benefit, processors and retailers, they also continue to consolidate these actors' power. As discussed above, this is often to the detriment of other actors in the food supply chain, and of the sustainability of the food system as a whole. Further orienting UK agricultural production towards international markets post-Brexit will only increase reliance on this model of provisioning, and further consolidate processor and retailer power, with potentially negative sustainability outcomes.

Greater focus on market competitiveness may also reduce the UK's food self-sufficiency. As discussed above, it may become increasingly difficult for some sectors, e.g., beef and sheep, to remain viable post-Brexit. This may lead to farmers exiting the sector, which, in turn, may result in less of these products being supplied by UK farmers and more being imported from elsewhere. From an economic viewpoint, this is not inherently bad (i.e., it makes the most sense for such products to come from countries that have a comparative advantage in producing them). Moreover, decreased self-sufficiency is by no means an automatic threat to food security (Hubbard and Hubbard, 2013). Nevertheless, it is important that policymakers and researchers ask questions about the impact decreased national self-sufficiency may have on food security in the UK. Greater consideration must also be given to the social impact of these policies. Some, including challenges related to farmer livelihoods and identity, rural society, devolution and the future of the UK's rural landscape, are considered here.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Social and economic sustainability***

As discussed above, agriculture industries in the UK's devolved nations rely much more heavily on beef and sheep production than in England. In addition, primary agriculture contributes more to devolved nations' economies and is more important socially. Should Brexit compromise these sectors' viability, the social and economic costs of job losses in these sectors will, therefore, not be felt evenly across the UK. Because agri-environmental policymaking is a devolved competency, devolved nations have the freedom to continue to support their agri-food sectors more directly (e.g., with some form of direct payments) than is planned in England. However, this is unlikely to fully compensate for major shifts in industry viability. Related to this, the devolved nature of agri-environmental policies could create further social and economic tensions. Farmers are already concerned about the potential for different farm supports being implemented across devolved nations, complaining of a lack of a 'level playing field' within the UK's single market (Hubbard, 2020).

The 'public money for public goods' approach<sup>10</sup> is meant to address the challenge of sustaining farmer livelihoods to a degree, replacing direct payments with environmental subsidies. However, if conservation and public good delivery become the main objectives of much of the UK's agriculture, this raises questions about the role of farmers. For many, farming – in particular, food production – is a way of life and part of personal identity. The impact on individuals of losing that role should not be taken lightly. Further, it is unlikely all farmers will be able to

remain in the industry, even with this support. This will have knock-on effects for the many other rural businesses that support primary agriculture. Currently, there are no major proposals for how these challenges should be addressed. The social and economic cost of significant job losses in the agriculture sector needs to be considered much more seriously, as does the impact these will have on the social fabric of rural societies across the UK. More attention should also be paid to determining how to ensure the UK single market remains 'fair' in subsidy terms.

These changes also have implications for the UK's landscape. Over 70 percent of the UK's landmass is currently used for agriculture, and 'traditional' agricultural landscapes are part of many people's social and cultural identity (Hynes and Campbell, 2011; Howley et al., 2014). However, if farmers choose to exit the sector because agriculture is no longer economically viable, or adopt more consolidated, 'industrial' farming practices to remain competitive, these landscapes could change: fewer extensive farms, more intensive ones. Such a shift may benefit processors and retailers, further transitioning UK agriculture to suit the integrated, global supply chain. It might also be a boon to consumers in the form of less expensive food. Yet, many members of the public have a negative perception of intensively farmed landscapes (Soliva et al., 2010; Hynes and Campbell, 2011; Howley et al., 2014). And, intensive agriculture often, although not always, creates greater environmental pressures than more extensive systems.

This underscores the often-contradictory nature of what is demanded from agriculture, and the 'wicked' nature of food production's problems. It also highlights the challenge of discerning whose priorities matter and achieving balance among competing ones. As argued above, if certain actors have disproportionate power in a system, it is unlikely all elements of sustainability will be given adequate weight in policymaking, with the result that sustainability is not truly achieved.

### *Environmental sustainability*

Finally, despite assertions that post-Brexit agri-environmental policies are overly focused on the environmental aspects of sustainability, it can be argued that the UK's focus on supporting 'environmentally sustainable' food production at home does not adequately address the environmental impact of food production throughout its supply chain. Again, given the current direction of UK trade policy, it is likely that more, not less of the UK's food will come from abroad. In the absence of quality and safety standards for imported food, there is no mechanism for addressing agriculture's negative externalities (e.g., water pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, etc.) created elsewhere. In effect, the UK will merely be exporting these externalities to other countries, rather than adequately addressing them at home. Indeed, this challenge extends beyond environmental externalities. For example, labour standards in many countries are lower than in the UK (although the situation for agri-food labourers in the UK is far from perfect [e.g., Lawrence, 2016; Milbourne and Coulson, 2021]). Again, there are no tangible measures in place to address this issue.

This is not a new phenomenon. Many argue that, across Europe, food productions' environmental and social externalities have been exported and distanced for decades (Marsden, 2013; Pretty and Bharucha, 2014; Garnett, 2015; Lang, 2020). Nonetheless, if the UK and devolved governments truly wish to address environmental sustainability, it must be tackled along the length of the supply chain, not merely offshored. Closing aforementioned policy gaps is a start. More honest conversations about what the current focus on environmental sustainability is actually achieving – and who it is benefitting – are also necessary.

### **Conclusions**

Previously, a concentration of power in the hands of primary producers in the UK and the EU contributed to a host of environmental and social problems. In recent decades, a shift in policy focus towards greater market orientation and environmental objectives – reflective of a transfer of power away from primary producers towards processors, retailers, and consumers – has helped overcome some of these challenges. In the UK, this trend has been intensified by Brexit. However, as is a classic of 'wicked' problems, solving some of the UK's food system sustainability challenges has created new ones, many of which are exaggerated by new power imbalances and the complexity of the UK policymaking environment. In particular, the social element of sustainability appears to be missing from the current approach. Moving forward, if the UK food system is to become truly sustainable, all of sustainability's pillars must be given equal weight. This means redressing some of the (new) power imbalances that exist in the system. Further, there is likely no fixed point at which sustainability will be fully accomplished. Achieving and maintaining a balance among actors' competing goals will require ongoing concerted effort.

As with all wicked problems, it is not possible to simultaneously maximise all actors' desired outcomes regarding 'sustainable' food production. Reaching compromise should therefore be a key policy goal. However, this is difficult because food systems are highly complex, involving many actors with competing goals. In the UK context, the challenge is amplified because of the fragmented policy environment. The UK's devolved nations' unique socio-political and environmental contexts necessitate devolved policy competencies, including those related to food production, but this need has the potential to create significant friction among food system actors, particularly producers who must still operate within a single UK market. Brexit has introduced even more complexity.

Now outside the EU, the UK has an opportunity to think anew about how it supports food and agriculture. For the first time in nearly 50 years, it has direct control of policies in this arena. Asking questions such as those proposed here may help ensure such a balance is reached, but these are only a start. Whichever questions policymakers ask, the direction UK agri-environmental policy takes in the years to come will depend on the degree to which true compromise is realised.



## Notes

- 1 Today, the CAP delivers three main types of payment support to farmers under two financial pillars. So-called ‘Pillar 1’ support includes (i) Direct Payments, comprising a Basic Payment Scheme (area-based income support payments) and payments for ‘greening measures’ (30 percent of Direct Payments), as well as (ii) a small number of market management measures such as import tariffs and crisis management support payments. The much smaller ‘Pillar 2’ support mechanisms provides funding for (iii) rural development schemes and agri-environmental initiatives (European Commission, 2017).
- 2 Although not all UK nations are set to take the same approach – discussed below.
- 3 Seven of these have significant and direct roles in regulating the food system, nine have less-direct or supporting roles (Parsons, 2020).
- 4 Formerly ‘less favoured’. Land that is considered difficult to produce food and fibre on, e.g., because of land base or topography.
- 5 The Good Friday Agreement, or the Northern Ireland peace deal, brought an end to three decades of conflict (‘The Northern Ireland Conflict’, or ‘The Troubles’) between Republicans and Unionists in Northern Ireland. Central to this was an agreement between The UK and Ireland to maintain an open border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. McGarry and O’Leary (2004) offer a comprehensive overview of the conflict and the GFA.
- 6 A complete list of these rules is listed in Annex II of the NI protocol. See UK Cabinet Office (2021).
- 7 Tesco commands 21 percent of market share, followed by Sainsbury’s at 11 percent and Asda at 10 percent.
- 8 Companies own the inputs (e.g., feed and chicks) and the outputs (e.g., meat, eggs), while the growing is outsourced to farmers (Weis, 2007; UN FAO, 2014).
- 9 Various other social challenges exist, including those related to public health, nutrition and labour, and are also hugely important, but it is not possible to cover them all in this chapter.
- 10 So far, mainly being adopted in England.

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# 6 Resistance to mining and pathways to a sustainable rural environment

## Rewriting the maps

*V'cenza Cirefice, Sinéad Mercier and Aideen O'Dochartaigh*

### Introduction

Northern Ireland is a unique area of the UK and Ireland, with its own approach to environmental governance, as well as a unique context and history to consider when exploring sustainability for rural society (Brennan, Purdy and Hjerp, 2017). Although Northern Ireland is a devolved administration under the jurisdiction of the UK, it is biophysically part of one island with the Republic of Ireland (ROI). This has deep implications for how land is used and the rural environment conceptualised in Northern Ireland. This chapter explores how extractivism, in the form of mining, presents a threat to ecological and societal sustainability in rural Northern Ireland, and explores how rural societies are addressing the challenge of Brexit by developing pathways to a sustainable future from the ground up.

Much research highlights the impacts and dynamics of extractivism in the Global South. However, in light of recent calls for increased mining in Europe (del Marmol and Vaccaro, 2020), it is clear we need a deeper understanding of how this could play out in Global North contexts. Brexit puts Northern Ireland in a uniquely vulnerable situation with regard to environmental governance, with rural areas facing the possibility of becoming sacrifice zones for extractivism via mining (Brennan, Dobbs and Gravey, 2019). To understand the implications of mining for rural societies and the environment in a Global North context, in this chapter we apply an environmental justice lens to a case study of a prospective gold mine in Northern Ireland, mobilising the concepts of resource frontiers, Lawscaping and rural sacrifice zones to develop key insights from the case. These concepts can assist researchers and community activists in navigating the presentation of the mining as a neutral process, facilitated by an objective legislative framework that sees conflict and pollution as requiring a mere technological fix, governance or managerial change to mitigate the impacts of operations. Conflicts between local rural communities, mining companies and facilitative states are understood as a clash of understandings of what land is – a lived-in-place or a 'thing' for commercial extraction (Graham, 2011). Examining the historical and political origins of this latter perspective exposes extractivism as a system rooted in patriarchy and a pillar of neoliberal capitalism, relying on legal techniques



developed in the colonial period to delegitimise other ways of seeing land in order to dispossess prior inhabitants of new frontiers.

Building on these insights, we point towards pathways for a more just and equitable rural society in Northern Ireland. Rural populations are not passive victims in this context but are involved in resistance movements that are challenging the extractive economy and demanding alternatives that would create a more just rural society, in ecological, social and economic terms. We present some of the resistance movements to extractivism and the lessons we can learn from listening to rural, frontline community voices, highlighting the legal, policy and collaborative avenues used by communities to develop pathways to a more sustainable future.

### Mining in Northern Ireland

What has been called a ‘mining bonanza’ is currently unfolding in Northern Ireland (Greene and Leake, 2019), with almost 25 percent of the total land area (335,000 hectares) concessioned for mineral prospecting licenses. Multiple companies, both local and international, have been awarded prospecting licenses and there is one active gold mine, the Cavanacaw Gold Mine near Omagh, active since 2007 and operated by a Canadian company, Galantas Gold (Figure 6.1).

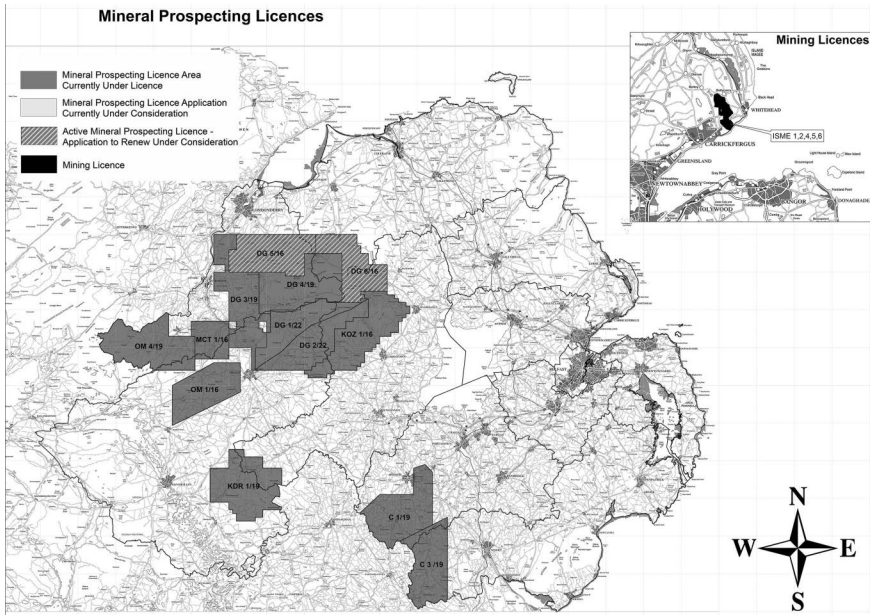


Figure 6.1 Mineral prospecting licences in Northern Ireland.  
Source: Department for the Economy (2022).

Government policy across the island of Ireland is supportive of the mining industry. Both ROI and NI rank in the top ten by the Fraser Institute (Yunis and Aliakbari, 2021) in terms of the policy perception index, which measures how attractive a county's policy climate is to mining. As of August 2021, there is one live planning application for a mine on the Island of Ireland, promoted by Dalradian Gold, a Canadian exploration company that has been active in the Sperrin mountains (Sperrins) since 2009 carrying out exploratory works. The company has acquired over 122,000 hectares in prospecting licences across the Sperrins, almost ten percent of the total land area of Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup> Plans for the proposed project include an underground gold mine at Curraghinalt as well as a processing plant and a 17-storey high dry stack facility on Crockanboy Hill less than one kilometre from the village of Greencastle. This is within the context of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), beside an EU-designated Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI), as well as many archaeological sites. This application was submitted in November 2017 and represents one of the largest applications ever seen on the Island at 10,000 pages. The Department for Infrastructure, NI, which is tasked with deciding on the application, has yet to make a decision, but has announced that the application will go through an independent public inquiry. In what follows we chart the community resistance to mining across Ireland, before relating this case study to the theoretical concept of environmental justice, and then explore pathways to sustainable futures. A range of secondary data was gathered and analysed for the case study, including policy documents, planning applications and submissions, media reports, stakeholder reports, and websites and publications from community and other civil society groups.

## **The expanding resource frontier**

Mining tends to be presented in international industry and government discourse as a socially beneficial activity necessary for the transition to a low-carbon economy, bringing jobs and prosperity to underdeveloped rural regions. The reality is more complex, with mining activity in rural regions often marked by conflict, environmental degradation and economic instability (Responsible Mining Index, 2020). Thus, demonstrating the need for a critical re-examination of taken-for-granted assumptions when dealing with rural sustainability.

Countless empirical studies document the continued impoverishment and social and environmental destruction brought by extractive projects (Nash, 1993; Horowitz, 2004; Kirsch, 2007; Bebbington and Bury, 2013; Gilberthorpe, Agol and Gegg, 2016; Jalbert et al., 2017). For example, gold mining, as is proposed in the Sperrins, is particularly socially and ecologically damaging, leaving huge 'ecological rucksacks' (Martinez-Alier, 2003: 225). Producing a single gold ring generates 20 tonnes of mine waste (Gaia Foundation, 2021: 2), and the process relies on toxic substances such as mercury or cyanide (Martinez-Alier, 2003: 101). The commodities boom at the start of the 21st century resulted in many new

extractivist projects and associated resistance (Veltmeyer, 2013; Veltmeyer and Bowles, 2014). Resource frontiers continue to expand around the world driven by a high global metabolism for resources (Tsing, 2003). These frontiers typically expand across Indigenous, peasant and rural people's lands (War on Want, 2019). While carbon frontiers that pursue fossil fuel resources are in decline, new frontiers in biofuels, plantation crops and minerals are increasing, pursued by corporate and state extractive activity often in the name of 'post-carbon climate friendly economic shifts' (Tilley, 2020: 1435). The global mining industry is working to position itself as a leader in the energy transition, with claims of sustainable mining as central for the switch to renewables. This is set to continue as OECD's (2019) Global Resources Outlook to 2060 suggests that global GDP will triple by 2060. This will depend on the growth of extractivism, with a projected 100 and 50 percent increase in metals (War on Want, 2019: 9).

The expanding extractive frontier is pushing its way into Europe, with Indigenous (such as the Sami) and rural communities now facing what communities in the Global South have endured since colonisation. The European Commission's critical raw metals action plan (European Commission, 2020b) outlines the need for increased extractivism in Europe and the Global South to meet energy needs. This push for increased mining has been termed the European Mining Boom. del Marmol and Vaccaro (2020) outline the policies the EU is pushing to enable increased extractivism in the form of mining, noting that the model of rural development across Europe is moving from one of natural protection to one of marking out land for critical minerals, creating far-reaching consequences for rural development. Although the UK has left the EU, these narratives are prominent there too (Milmo, 2021), from Cornish Lithium to precious metals in Scotland and Northern Ireland. In the Sperrins, the Canadian company Dalradian pushes a narrative of jobs and prosperity for the area; however, it is not clear how many jobs will be created and how many will go to local people. Further, Dalradian is ultimately owned by Orion Mining Finance, a New York-based investment firm, while the British Crown Estates own the precious metals in Northern Ireland and will receive four percent of the revenue, so most wealth will be extracted.

### **Community resistance to mining**

As interest in mining in Northern Ireland has grown, so too has community resistance. This reflects a growing international movement. Globally, frontline communities are pushing back against the expansion of extractivism, offering solutions to social and ecological injustice. Frontline community refers to communities that have collectively recognised the ways in which they are impacted and are collectively organising against it, moving beyond the passive term of 'impacted' or 'affected' community, 'frontline' implies a sense of agency. However, frontline voices have historically been largely absent in climate policy, campaigning spaces and agendas (War on Want, 2019). Rural communities are largely behind these struggles for environmental justice. These movements re-politicise

areas that have been labelled non-political, or requiring only ‘technical-fixes’, in our globalised economy (Byres, 2019).

Local grassroots resistance has been growing across Northern Ireland, not only to mining but also fracking, the enclosure of public park lands, industrial agriculture and oil and gas drilling. In the case of Dalradian’s proposed gold mine, to date over 37,000 objection letters have been sent into the application (Preston, 2021), the highest number ever seen to a planning application on this island. This gives some sense of the resistance felt to this project, with objections being sent in from across the North and South of the island as well as internationally. Local communities have been organising in opposition to Dalradian’s plans since 2015, when Save our Sperrins community group was established. Since then, up to 12 groups across the Sperrins have been established. There is also a range of activist, NGO and trade union collectives engaging in the resistance, including Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland, The Environmental Gathering, and Communities Against the Injustice of Mining (CAIM), a recently established network of communities opposing mineral prospecting and mining across the Island.

Resistance has incorporated multiple tactics from public meetings, community celebrations, protests and marches, exhibitions, writing and sending objection letters. As well as an occupation of the site on Crockanboy Hill called the Greencastle People’s Office (GPO), and legal challenges. For example, in November 2019, local resident and member of Save Our Sperrins, Fidelma O’Kane successfully challenged the water discharge consent related to the mine agreed in 2017 in the High Court (Belfast Telegraph, 2019). The Owenkillew and Owenreagh rivers begin in the Sperrin Mountains, adjacent to the proposed site. They are home to one of Europe’s largest populations of freshwater pearl mussels, Ireland’s only endangered species (Joint Nature Conservation Committee, 2021). Both rivers are protected Special Areas of Conservation and Areas of Special Scientific Interest. These two tributaries feed into the cross-border Foyle catchment area that supplies drinking water to many people on both sides of the border. Permission has not yet been given but already this rural community has faced extreme impacts from the extractive plans, including the division of the community and the criminalisation of local people as well as facing intimidation and death threats (Rimmer, 2019). Despite these challenges, the resistance in the Sperrins represents one of the strongest environmental justice struggles on this island and has mobilised a huge range of people, many of whom are new to this form of activism.

### **Mining – an environmental justice lens**

Despite the negative ecological and social impacts, narratives of prosperity and the promise of modernity to be delivered through extractive industries are still evident in European understandings of development (del Mármol and Vaccaro, 2020). Much of the literature on environmental policy, extractive industries and development are focused on how to do mining better (Bridge, 2004). Here mining is framed as an issue of environmental performance, with poor performance indicating, for example, a lack of investment in technology, capital or insufficient

managerial skills (Porter, 1990), or an issue of eco-efficiency (Warhurst and Franklin, 2001). If the negative consequences of mining are referred to, narratives of technological innovation and corporate social responsibility are put forward by industry actors (Svampa, 2013). This framing is consistent with a weak sustainable development and the eco-modernist narrative, which assumes constant growth and a continual increase in the flow of minerals into the global economy (Dryzek, 1997). This perspective does not ask if these resources are socially necessary (Bridge, 2004: 232), and does not consider the impacts on rural communities and the differential power dynamics in such spaces (Fazito, Scott and Russell, 2019). Similar to other struggles over natural resources, mining is presented 'in an objective light' as an ecologically, economically and socially beneficial rural development, despite clear evidence to the contrary (Proulx and Crane, 2020). This portrayal of objectivity in government and industry discourse delegitimises resistance to mining, even to the point of criminalising local residents. This highlights the systems of oppression underpinning extractivism and the urgent need for an environmental justice approach to studies in this area.

In contrast, an environmental justice perspective highlights themes of power, control and resource rights (Martinez-Alier, 2001). This approach recognises that extractivism is not a neutral environmental process but is embedded in power structures and systems of oppression, and illustrates that environmental burdens are concentrated on those most marginalised in society (Martinez-Alier, 2001; Bebbington et al., 2008). Work within feminist political ecology (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayer and Wangari, 1996; Harcourt and Nelson, 2015) and critical resource geographies (Himley, Havice and Valdivia, 2021) have also explored these perspectives. Extractivism is rooted in colonialism and is an economic model based on continual growth and a way of seeing the world. Klein (2014: 169) calls extractivism, a 'dominance-based relationship with the earth, one of purely taking', which is 'the opposite of stewardship, which involves taking but also taking care that regeneration and future life continue'. If we take this understanding of extractivism seriously, it becomes clear that it is not a neutral process requiring a technological fix, a governance or managerial change to mitigate the impacts of these operations. It's a system rooted in colonialism, patriarchy and a pillar that upholds neoliberal capitalism, and needs to be examined as such. Much of the relevant environmental justice literature deals with extractivism in a Global South context, therefore using this lens within the Global North assists us in addressing a research gap.

In the case of mining in Northern Ireland, we see prospecting concessions concentrated to the west and border areas of the province, areas which have faced under-investment, marginalisation and are still marked by legacies of conflict and colonialism (Hayward, 2017). Further, research has revealed that the border region is most vulnerable to the impacts from Brexit (Hayward, 2017). Utilising an environmental justice perspective enables us to examine the power structures underpinning extractivism in the unique context of post-Brexit Northern Ireland. Within this overarching lens, we apply the concepts of resource frontiers, Lawscaping and rural sacrifice zones to the issue of mining in Northern

Ireland to further our understanding of its implications for rural societies and the environment. These concepts allow us to situate Northern Ireland in the recent mining boom in Europe and understand the peripheralisation of this region as part of a longer historical, political and spatial process.

### **Creating rural sacrifice zones – lawscaping the Island of Ireland**

In the extractive worldview, we see the objectification of the earth and devaluation of the frontline communities who suffer the worst impacts of extraction (Jewett and Garavan, 2019), with extraction points considered as peripheral, as sacrifice zones (Klein, 2014). Rurality has been linked to processes of marginalisation and decline (del Mármol and Vaccaro, 2020). Narratives of an empty countryside have been advantageous for extractive industries as rural areas are often conceptualised as empty wilderness, sacrifice zones to facilitate the interests of mining industries (Landén and Fotaki, 2018). It has been suggested that the mineral age within Europe is causing a process of inner colonialism, where rural areas are sacrificed for the needs of urban centres (del Mármol and Vaccaro, 2020: 47).

In the Irish context, policymakers in North and South have embraced neoliberal efforts to attract foreign direct investment (Byres, 2019), particularly in natural resources (Slevin, 2016). In the North, a ‘double transition’ has taken place to both peace and neoliberalism (McCabe, 2012). The de-escalation of conflict has led to the treatment of NI aligning with that of other peripheral regions of the UK, which remain subordinate to the financial power of London (Byres, 2019). Years of conflict followed by austerity and extractive economics has left an unequal society. It is noted that potential mines are located on the border and the historically marginalised rural areas ‘west of the Bann’. Thus, the expanding resource frontier is creating a dangerous situation for rural areas across NI to become a sacrifice zone.

Extractivism relies on the rendering of land in an abstract, neutral and rationalised manner in order to remove it from the context and place-based understandings of local communities. Mining law and policy on the island of Ireland operate in such a way as to support this. The concept of Lawscaping is broadly used to explain how the law treats land as a disembodied ‘thing’ (Graham, 2011), a neutralising process that undermines non-commercial views of land. This Lawscaping process has historical associations on the island of Ireland, illustrated by the colonial plantation of the island which occurred prior to the English Enclosure Movement (Bhandar, 2018). In the pre-colonial era, William J. Smyth contends that Ireland’s land was understood and mapped in the oral tradition according to land-use potential, webs of kinship and forms of animism (Smyth, 2006: 83). A ‘conquest by law’ ensued, with colonisation forcibly removing previous embedded understandings of land, to replace them with tenure and resource-ownership as we understand it today (Smyth, 2006: 84). The Downs Survey of the island taken in the years 1656–1658 was the first detailed land survey on a national scale (Bhandar, 2018: 40). The survey sought to facilitate a “massive land transfer

to private adventurers”, soldiers who were part of an “immigrant landlord class” (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2002: 122 in Bhandar, 2018: 41). To do so, the surgeon-general of the English army William Petty developed a standardisation and quantification process to render Ireland a *terra nullius* or ‘no man’s land’ (Bhandar, 2018: 40). Petty’s mapping reduced the land and its people to a collection of economic units based on ‘a racial regime of ownership’ (Bhandar, 2018: 48). This meant that those who engaged in what produced economic worth – English cultivation methods – were judged as being entitled to divine ownership, while those who left the land as a depicted unproductive wilderness were dispossessed in a seemingly neutral, mathematical manner (Bhandar, 2018: 45). The former ways of living in place, such as understanding land and its features through narrative memory and poetry were removed in favour of rendering land as a commercial product (Smyth, 2006: 74). Later surveys, such as the 1825–1841 Ordnance Survey, further disembodied the land through standardisation as local place-names were translated from the native Irish into meaningless phonetic English translations (Mercier and Holly, 2020: 8).

On the island today, the expansion of extractivism is progressing through another Lawscaping process. The Tellus Survey project to chart mining prospects across the land of Ireland, implemented by the Geological Survey Northern Ireland (GSNI) and Geological Survey Ireland (GSI), and supported by the Department of the Economy (NI) and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (RoI), has carried out extensive geological and geophysical mapping of the whole Island of Ireland since 2004. These maps are the basis for licensing rounds, companies are invited to bid to prospect for minerals in any part of the island. There are no restrictions – ecological, archaeological, religious or cultural – placed on the activity apart from built-up urban centres. The religious site of Glendalough, for example, is included in the south, as is the UNESCO World Heritage site of the Burren and all protected AONB in the north. Through this mapping, the land is re-written in a new language of extractive opportunity – as mere fungible entities for trade on the global market. Local people’s views of the land as a ‘peopled place’ and ecological factors are all rendered unseen. As of December 2021, in ROI there are 426 minerals prospecting licences, five mining licences and five mining leases granted by the government (Government of Ireland, 2021).

Mapping Glendalough or the Sperrins purely as opportunities for extraction is possible because legislation on mining in both regions of Ireland render natural resources ‘seen’ as purely commercial entities (Slevin, 2016). All mines and minerals in Northern Ireland are vested exclusively in the Ministry of Commerce, and gold in the Crown Estate (Northern Ireland. *Mineral Development Act* (Northern Ireland) 1969, while Article 10(1) of the Irish Constitution vests ownership of all natural resources in the State, subject to existing lawful rights, and presumes the establishment of a licensing/leasing regime (Ireland, *Bunreacht na hÉireann* 1937). With regards to minerals, gold and silver, state ownership is vested in the Minister for the Environment, Climate Action and Communications and leased to third parties such as exploration or mining companies (Ireland, *Minerals Development*

Acts 1940–1999).<sup>2</sup> Ministers grant consent to a company to prospect for and ‘work’ minerals. If the land is privately owned, licence or lease holders in respect of natural resources do not have a right to access or occupy the land without a property owner’s consent to take the resource for which a lease or licence is granted. However, the Irish government has previously made compulsory purchase orders and imprisoned land-owners for refusing to comply with court injunctions granting company access to land, for example, when granting land for the Shell gas project in Erris, Co. Mayo (Barrington, 2010: 14). This resistance by local people was based on the ‘unaccounted concept’ of ‘love of the land and love of the place’ (Gilmartin, 2009: 276), following a long legacy of place-based resistance rooted in cultural and environmental understandings of the land as against its commercialisation (Smyth, 2006: 88).

### Pathways to a sustainable rural society

In this section, we outline some of the ways in which rural communities in Northern Ireland are developing their own pathways to a just and socially and environmentally sustainable future. We focus particularly on the legislative and soft law hooks being leveraged by communities in relation to the proposed



Figure 6.2 Sign erected on the Crockanboy Road in reaction to an abandonment notice from the Department of Infrastructure.

Source: Author.



Dalradian gold mine, and the emerging strategy of building resistance through collaboration. In addition, we signpost future directions within these strategies for these communities and consider how communities can navigate the challenges of Brexit (Figure 6.2).

### **Navigating Brexit**

Brexit has complicated the situation in relation to access to justice in Northern Ireland, not least due to the removal of vast swathes of EU environmental law and governance structures and scrutiny (Brennan, Dobbs and Gravey, 2019). One of the most effective legal approaches to protecting places from extractivism in Europe has been the European Union's Natura 2000 network of protections, comprising of SAC designated under the Habitats Directive (Council directive 92/43/EEC [1992]) and Special Protection Areas (SPA) designated under the Birds Directive (Council Directive 79/409/EEC [1979]). Environmental rights under the Natura 2000 framework can block a project should it be found to conflict with the conservation objectives of a particular EU-designated site (Jackson, 2018). The protection extends beyond the delineated boundary of an SAC or SPA to protect the vicinity, particularly waterways, in order to prevent residual pollution. Communities on the island of Ireland, as across Europe, have grown adept at using such rights to block extractivist developments they also oppose for wider reasons inexpressible under current legal or policy frameworks.

To ensure the continuation of EU environmental protections after Brexit, UK Environment Secretary Michael Gove introduced the Environment Bill in 2018 as a demonstration of 'this government's strong commitment to maintain environmental protection as we leave the EU' and established an Office for Environmental Protection [OEP] which would 'provide independent scrutiny and advice, and hold government to account on development and implementation of environmental law and policy' (Gove, 2018). In the final UK *Environment Act 2021*, Northern Ireland was belatedly included as a region with access to the OEP, which replaces the European Commission and the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) as a supra-regional oversight body. Environmental campaigners in the country have heavily criticised the removal of the European Commission and CJEU supra-national oversight bodies (Gabbitas, 2019), which are considered more effective than the planned UK replacement.

The feared downgrading of protections appears to be playing out in practice. On the 28th of 2017, Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland sought a court order to force the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to immediately issue a Stop Notice to halt the unauthorised extraction of up to two million tonnes of sand a year from Lough Neagh, a SPA (Friends of the Earth Limited Application [2017]). The case was successful in quashing the Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs decision not to order a Stop Notice. However, in 2018 the Planning Appeals Commission decided that extraction should continue with added minor restrictions, despite a 75 percent collapse in the site's bird population since its designation (Irish News, 2020). The case is

included in a list of open files before the European Commission that have not yet escalated to infringement proceedings (European Commission, 2020a). The European Court of Justice continues to have jurisdiction over cases concerning infringements of EU law that occurred in the period before the end of the transition period under Article 87 of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement (European Commission, 2019). There are four Special Areas of Conservation in the vicinity of the Sperrins gold mine, which include the Owenkillew River SAC, the River Foyle and tributaries, the River Roe and tributaries and the Banagher Glen and Teal Lough. However, unfortunately such an option may not be open to mining campaigners in the Sperrins as no complaint or case was brought before the final Brexit withdrawal date. Campaigners fear the loss of oversight by EU institutions will make the area more vulnerable to exploitation for mining (Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland, 2021). Affording access to justice to protect SACs within the Sperrins will certainly be a litmus test for a government that seeks to prove it will uphold protections to the same, if not enhanced, standards as the EU.

### **Legislative hooks**

As Brexit has confined the avenues of protection available to communities in Northern Ireland, new ones must emerge. Here we consider international hard and soft law ‘hooks’ which communities can use to fight against extractivist ‘Lawscape’ and re-embed a substantive understanding of the land. These include international campaigns for rights of nature, rights to landscape, human rights instruments and the Aarhus and Espoo Conventions (UNECE, 1998, 1991).

Seeing territory as a substantive landscape and collective good interwoven with local people and their way of life is increasingly being given recognition in ‘soft law’ and public policy contexts at international, regional and national level. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has ruled against governments and mining companies in recognising the collective property rights of Indigenous peoples, including customary tenure, access to land and resources despite not having a proper title. This has included recognition of a people’s spiritual and cultural links to a particular place (Strecker, 2018, 2020).<sup>3</sup> Other international soft law instruments have similarly expressed collective rights to land, customary tenure, access to resources and community cultural and spiritual connections to land, such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP, 2018) and the Akwé: Con Guidelines (CBD, 2004). Indigenous communities do face serious issues with implementation of positive judgements. As extractivism intensifies, there is a growing need to cross the indigenous and non-indigenous divide and grant similar collective concepts of property and recognition of cultural, spiritual connections to land in order to secure protection for rural and other local peoples that rely on that land (Strecker, 2018).

The concept of the ‘rights of nature’ has been leveraged around the world in anti-mining and anti-extractive struggles. Such struggles highlight how non-human entities such as corporations are granted legal ‘personhood’ and even rights to pollute, while ecosystems and local relationships to place remain largely

without protection (Fitz-Henry, 2018; Strecker, 2018). A narrative of reclaiming rights for both communities and nature emerges strongly from the anti-mining activism in the Sperrins (See Figure 6.2). On the third of April 2021, local people from Greencastle gathered on Crockanboy Road to assert their rights to community. They did so in response to an abandonment notice from the Department of Infrastructure that appeared along this road without warning, stating the road would be given to Dalradian Gold. This road is not insignificant; beyond being an important route used by the community for generations, it is home to the GPO, an occupied area of the proposed mine site that has been the heart of resistance for over 1,000 days. This declaration (Figure 6.1) attests to the interconnection felt between human and the more-than-human world, the agency of those within an extractive frontier and the deep time scales of intergenerational thinking; all of which are vital components we must nurture in times of urgent socio-ecological crisis. This declaration speaks to the territory as lived and living memory.

Two council areas in Northern Ireland recently passed a motion in support of the rights of nature: Derry and Strabane District Council on the 25th June 2021 and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council on 5th July 2021 (Doran and Killeen, 2021). This motion states that community workshops will be held to draw up a declaration on the rights of nature. Maeve O'Neill, activist and councillor, brought the motion to council stating:

The environmental justice movement recognises that it is those communities who are most deprived and also communities of colour who are hardest hit by an unhealthy environment. There's ordinary working-class communities that are targeted by pollutant industries and who are most exposed to pollution. What Rights of Nature can do is to rebalance the systems of governance to allow communities to assert their rights to a healthy environment but it also allows nature the rights to exist, flourish and naturally evolve. There are incredible examples worldwide. Rights of Nature is embedded in the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador and New Zealand in 2018 gave rights to the Whanganui River, recognising that the river is a giver of life... Imagine that for the River Foyle system and its tributaries and the ecosystems within it.

(O'Neill quoted in Anderson, 2021)

Also relevant is 'rights to landscape'. The GPO declaration of the Rights of the Community (Figure 6.2) gives expression to already existing public policy under the European Landscape Convention (ELC), which entered into force for the UK in March 2007.<sup>4</sup> The convention:

conceives of landscape above all as a people's landscape, and accordingly, provides for the active participation of the public in the formulation of landscape plans and policies.

(Strecker, 2020: 328)

In protecting substantive and peopled conceptions of landscape the Convention conceivably makes ‘unaccounted concepts’ count (Killian, 2010). Northern Ireland published a Landscape Charter in 2014 (NIEA, 2014) which covers the Sperrins Mountains, a site designated an AONB in 2008 (DAERA, 2022). However, the European Landscape Convention is as yet an example of ‘soft law’ that should guide planning and development, as opposed to having legal force. There are no individual or collective complaint mechanisms and interpretations of landscape in caselaw from the European Court of Human Rights have remained aesthetic in focus (Strecker, 2018).

Another option is to protect the environment by protecting human rights to a healthy environment, a central topic of discussion for the all-island law group Environmental Justice Network Ireland (EJNI). Under the EU/UK Withdrawal Agreement, the UK Government has committed, in Article 2 (1) of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol, to ensuring that certain equality and human rights in Northern Ireland will continue to be protected after Brexit (Hough, 2019: 64). The UK also remains a signatory to the European Court of Human Rights, which restrictively interprets rights to the environment as rights that protect against immediate natural disasters, or a right that protects more aesthetic considerations. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) sets out obligations on the NI Executive and departments to take actions to prevent adverse environmental impact upon the individual, including the rights to health, water, food, housing, life and privacy (NIHRC, 2015). Particularly relevant to the Sperrins is that the NI Executive has also transposed into national law duties to protect the rights of public access to justice and public participation in decision-making on the environment and public health. These provisions are strengthened by their requirement to be free from discrimination in the application of environmental legislation, the right to a private and family life and the right of everyone to the ‘peaceful enjoyment of [his or her] possessions’ under the European Convention on Human Rights (NIHRC, 2015). These obligations related to public participation, access to justice and freedom from discrimination are particularly pertinent in the case of the Sperrins due to the lack of equal protection for people in Northern Ireland, as a result of weaker environmental protections and their lack of consideration in Brexit negotiations. As Alison Hough outlines, Brexit represents a wider threat to environmental governance on the island due to its undermining of ‘the current framework of cross-border co-operation that was fostered by the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement’ for peace in 1998 (Hough, 2019: 55).

### **Resistance through collaboration**

One way in which communities in Northern Ireland have dealt with the uncertainty of Brexit is through developing alliances with other activists, both on the island of Ireland and globally. Resistance to mining is part of an active recent history of community resistance to extractivism in both the ROI and Northern Ireland, particularly petroleum extraction. The construction of new gas infrastructure in Co. Mayo in the early 2000s was the site of a protracted 15-year resistance

against Royal Dutch Shell from local communities and other activists (Darcy and Cox, 2019). Since 2017 the Irish government has banned onshore hydraulic fracturing in the state and the issuing of new offshore petroleum exploration and extraction licences. There is also significant resistance by community and activist groups to proposed Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) import terminals. The fossil fuel industry has cited the amount of 'anti-industry sentiment generally prevailing' as a disincentive to investment in Ireland (PwC Ireland, 2019: 12). In Northern Ireland, resistance has been successful in fighting off fracking in Woodburn Forest, Carrickfergus with the last exploration licence relinquished in April 2020. However, the threat has been re-introduced with licence applications lodged by Tamboran and EHA in Fermanagh and Lough Neagh (Hayhurst, 2020).

Resistance to mining in ROI has focused both on existing mines and mining licences, much of which is focused in the border counties Monaghan, Cavan and Donegal. Objections are focused on the environmental and health impacts, along with lack of opportunity for public participation (Redhills Action Against Mining, 2019). In general, planning law in relation to extractive regimes is opaque (Ryall, 2018), with quarrying legislation alone described as a system of 'labyrinthine complexity' (Doyle, 2011: 180). Mining, like peat and forestry, is subject to outdated methods of notification, such as short public consultations and notices on gateposts. Government departments also restrict environmental procedural rights by instituting departmental licencing systems to bypass the proper planning regime (Jackson, 2021). However, objections to mining applications have been more immediately successful than in Northern Ireland. Two licences, in the western ROI counties Donegal and Galway, were quickly withdrawn after community resistance and support from politicians (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019), in stark contrast to Dalradian's resolute pursuit of its plans in the Sperrins.

Resistance in the Sperrins, which represents a highly organised, internationalist and decentralised movement, has been providing support to other communities across Ireland opposing mineral prospecting and mining in their communities, including in Donegal. Due to the transboundary location of many licenses, along the ROI-NI border, it is clear that the impacts will not be confined to one side or the other. For example, Donegal will be more impacted than parts of Northern Ireland by particulate matter air pollution from mining in Curraghinalt, NI.

Historically community groups in NI and ROI have worked together on campaigns against extractivist projects, including proposed fracking in Co. Leitrim in the northwest of ROI and fracking at Woodburn, Co. Fermanagh, NI. These campaigns along with the campaign against the Shell gas terminal in Co. Mayo, also saw collaboration between activist groups and Irish NGOs. Nascent cross-border co-operation on resistance to mining is gathering pace with the formation of the CAIM network in February 2021, and relationships have developed through shared knowledge exchange at events and meetings between groups fighting several forms of extractivism throughout the island.

This resistance also has a global outlook. Many environmental struggles in Ireland, North and South, are local in nature, often against extractive industries

and industrial projects in a specific place. However there is a need to recognise the deep place-based rootedness of these grassroots movements and their solidarity connections around the world. ‘Glocal’ movements (Urkidi, 2010) are those rooted in place but that reach out to connect with and engage with other frontline communities around the world. The campaign in the Sperrins has connected with frontline communities in, Mexico, Cyprus, Romania, Greece, Honduras, Colombia, Peru, the Lakota Nation, Spain, Finland, Australia, New Zealand, the USA, Philippines, Papua New Guinea and Turkey.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have traced the developments in prospective mining projects in the North of Ireland within its unique context as a peripheral part of the UK. We have outlined that the resistance across the Sperrins is deeply connected on an all-island basis as well as internationally, as resistance reaches out and connects with frontline communities around the world. Instruments in policy that could lead to a more equitable rural society, in terms of environmental justice, have been identified, such as the landscape convention, rights of nature and the human right to the environment. Framing mining as an environmental justice issue, through the lenses of resource frontiers, extractivism and Lawscaping enables us to move beyond technical or eco-modernist understanding of mining. Instead, we see these conflicts as tied to power imbalances within a complex context of patriarchy, colonialism and neoliberal pathways of development, raising deeper questions about relationships with land and place. This is of particular urgency as Ireland has been identified as a hotspot in a European mining boom (Sullivan, 2021).

The conflict in the Sperrins highlights the difficulties with using environmental protections to protect a sense of ‘peopled place’. Sustainable development, in the form of local jobs, is often the retort to environmental concerns, as we see in the ‘jobs versus the environment’ narrative in the context of the Sperrins. In this narrative, the ‘public interest’ means overriding environmental and social concerns for commercial development. However, a ‘conservation v development’ ‘dichotomy’ is overly simplistic and fails to recognise the fundamental link between human development and the safeguarding of landscape and public space.

A combination of resistance techniques, policy, hard and soft-law pressures together can support pathways to a sustainable future. However, we caution against relying on legal or formal policy avenues as a panacea. Often communities pushback or defeat extractivist techniques through other means outside of government fora – for example, by flooding with objection, physical presence or direct action.

The struggles in the Sperrins are not just about opposing projects of so-called development and modernity, they also offer a radical critique of extremely relevant and pressing issues in our times of socio-ecological collapse. In the case of mining resistance, communities offer nuanced perspectives on the transition to a more

sustainable future in rural areas. Ideas are progressed that a just transition must be a post-extractive transition, that nature has rights and that people are nature. These narratives are fundamental, but may not be so evident in mainstream environmental discourse. Rural communities must be listened to and engaged in these issues rather than framed as backward looking and anti-development, or as passive victims. There is a need to recognise the agency of those in these so-called sacrifice zones, as it is these communities that have contributed least to the current crisis but are bearing the largest burdens. These issues speak to our understandings of socio-ecological relationships and the regenerative, post-extractive futures that are possible for rural areas, especially in times of extreme ecological collapse.

## Notes

- 1 See this map: MPL-Dalradian 2020 – Google My Maps.
- 2 The Minerals Development Act 2017, enacted on 26 July 2017 has not been commenced.
- 3 Cases include *Maya Indigenous Communities of Toledo District v Belize* (2004) and *Xákmok Kásek Indigenous Community v. Paraguay* (2010) discussed in *Strecker 2018*.
- 4 Ireland has also signed ratified the European Landscape Convention in March 2002, and came into effect in March 2004. The Council of Europe Faro Convention (Value of Cultural Heritage for Society) emphasises the relationship between landscape, community, human rights and democracy but has not yet been signed/ratified by Ireland or the United Kingdom.

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# 7 Governing like a forest

## Achieving diachronic integrity or emergency carbon sequestration through post-Brexit forest policy?

*Sophie Wynne-Jones, Norman Dandy, Theresa Bodner and John R. Healey*

### Introduction

Whilst Brexit presents a number of challenges, it also creates a juncture to potentially address longstanding tensions in rural land-use policy. Increasing pressure is now being felt to expand the extent of forests in Britain, particularly to meet carbon sequestration targets (Committee on Climate Change, 2020) but also to acknowledge the wider set of uses and values that trees provide for society, which are increasingly described as ‘ecosystem services’ (UK Government, 2021a; Waters, 2021). Critical questions have arisen about the balance between the wooded components within landscapes and other rural land uses/covers and whether Brexit could mark a turning point towards greater forest cover (Burton *et al.*, 2019; O’Neill and Osborne, 2020). An important tension here, in ensuring sustainable rural land-use governance, is not only the ultimate balance of land uses, but the rate of change that Brexit might herald. In this chapter, we explore the current pressures for rapid change in the UK’s forest landscape, whilst balancing this against lessons from the past. This involves a closer look at the time-cycles of forest policy and who, and what, they are intended to serve. Here we highlight a need for more durable and adaptable approaches to forest policy-making, but also to look beyond an anthropocentric focus to acknowledge the non-human agency and rhythms of forests themselves.

The chapter is structured as follows: In Section ‘Past Tensions’, we begin by considering some past tensions in forest policy before turning to consider potential policy and regulatory changes brought about by Brexit in Section ‘Brexit’. In Section ‘Discussion’, we explore the potential impacts of changes arising in our rural landscapes after Brexit, specifically in terms of the extent and form of forest cover arising, and the pace of such changes. We discuss this in the form of two hypothetical scenarios and, in our concluding discussion we reflect on the relative merits of both scenarios and the balance that needs to be struck between them.

### Past tensions

To inform our evaluation of the current pressures for change, we begin by exploring some of the past tensions in forest policy and the role time and human priority play there-in.

### *Time and adaptation*

Trees take time to grow. Forests develop and change over timescales well beyond most people's reckoning, and certainly over periods extending far beyond standard 'policy cycles' of around five years. In the UK, for example, most native species take at a minimum 20 years, but more often at least 50 years to mature. Many trees outlast people, spanning and linking generations and watching over our landscapes through markedly different eras. These timescales can make *deliberately* growing trees a tricky business, requiring a different mind-set to many modern enterprises: including farming which, whilst founded on long-term concerns such as intergenerational commitments and land stewardship, is dominated by a focus on annual crop cycles and rotations. Foresters have had to learn to plant trees for the next generation and harvest what the last generation left for them. Whilst such rhythms may often be understood and accepted by foresters themselves, they can lead to notable tensions and 'policy failure' – particularly when and where linked to demands for specific forest products and markets.

Since its earliest development, forest policy has generally been designed to optimise the benefits accrued to people from the management and use of trees, focusing on human values and timescales. The relatively stable and generic goal of timber production has provided a firm foundation for decades of forest policy. The objective of producing high-quality timber for use within the manufacture of various products – construction material, fencing etc. – has long underpinned the market in the UK, prompting planting-harvesting-replanting cycles. This generic goal does not, however, motivate sustainable management in every forest, nor stimulate widespread woodland creation amongst contemporary land managers (Lawrence and Dandy, 2014). Notably, woodland planting rates have been at historically low levels in the UK and less than half of the UK's woodlands are 'certified' with a management plan, let alone actually being managed (Forestry Commission, 2020). These policy 'failures' can, in part, be explained by the mismatch between society's human timescales and forest timescales.

Although objectives relating to recreation and biodiversity conservation have become more prominent over time, woodland creation efforts have long been explicitly grounded in the need to supply specific wood products. In the UK, for example, we hear of Admiral Nelson's early 17th century efforts to restore and replant the Forest of Dean so as to ensure a ship-building resource, the post-World War I drive to ensure timber for use within trench warfare and to maintain domestic coal mine production (West, 2003), and post-World War II incentivisation of poplar and willow growth for the match and basket making industries (Tabbush and Beaton, 1998). More recently the sector has sought to stimulate woodland creation and better management by highlighting the potential for various forms of woody biomass (woodchip; logs) as a source of renewable energy (Forestry Commission England, 2007). These initiatives led to the creation of numerous forests and woodlands across the UK – from the oak of the Forest of Dean to widely distributed patches of short-rotation willow coppice – much of which continues to exist.

However, non-human agency acts as a check on human ambition. Given the time required to grow trees, in many cases, society's needs and economic demands have moved on before the established forests had matured sufficiently to provide the intended products. Ironclads replaced wooden ships, trenches disappeared with the Blitzkrieg of tank warfare, basket-making shifted to plastics, and concerns about air quality are rapidly eroding trust in woodfuel. The outcome of this is a forest landscape that has grown in the shape of past policy needs: featuring numerous forests and woodlands in search of new, contemporary purposes and contributing to widely held understandings of woodlands as 'uneconomic', especially amongst farming stakeholders (Dandy, 2016). In the post-Brexit rush to afforest land in response to climate change, it seems pertinent to avoid establishing forests that could become similarly redundant as other technological fixes develop that usurp the current position of trees as perhaps the premier carbon capture technology.

Despite these policy 'failures' (in fact, likely in part *because* of them), in recent decades the forest sector has learnt the need for ever-increasing adaptability. The demand for timber has provided a foundation on which to build innovation and multifunctionality – such as the repurposing of forest areas for recreation (from mountain biking in conifer plantations to maze creation in short-rotation willow coppice) and the provision of education and healthcare. Forest policy has continued, however, to (re)define and target suites of products and services within relatively short (policy-oriented) time scales and with an unyielding faith in human intervention as the route towards realising those benefits. However, the tensions around the specificity and short-termism of policy, accelerated by the urgency of Brexit, draw attention to broader questions about the extent to which trees' non-human agency has been given consideration and allowed to play a role. By focusing forest policy on human timescales and values we systematically ignore the ecological narratives of the forest, which manifest over longer timescales. This has a range of implications, both ethically and ecologically, in terms of the health of the resulting ecosystems and the dominance of human needs. It also raises questions about the integrity of the places that result and the ways in which social and ecological elements combine within a landscape to provide a sense of meaning through continuity and attachment over time.

### *Diachronic integrity*

The environmental sustainability challenges created by the incongruity of (human) social and (non-human) ecological timescales have long been acknowledged. Within environmental ethics, foundational positions, such as Aldo Leopold's land ethic, directly draw attention to the need to extend our thinking temporally in order to fully comprehend the ecological impacts and consequences of our actions. Generally, social change, and more specifically anthropogenic environmental change (both intentional and unintentional), can occur at a faster pace than some longer-term components of ecological change: thus threatening sensitive balances and overwhelming 'natural' regulating processes. This is not to suggest that natural

systems are static and unchanging, but that human interventions can destabilise and overwhelm the dynamic equilibrium of such systems, particularly through repeated interference. For example, Grove-White (1997) was amongst those who identified the problems flowing from short-term case-by-case environmental impact assessment relative to cumulative impacts, and the challenges associated with ongoing entrenched governmental and industry control over policy timescales and embedded evaluation methodologies, including within forestry.

Amongst the many responses to this problem from environmental philosophers and sociologists has been an emphasis on place, narrative, and associated deliberative valuation and policy-making processes. Giving attention to place narrative(s) – both social and ecological – enables a focus on temporal aspects of place and the intrinsic dynamism of environmental settings. In an attempt to provide an effective foundation for these processes, Holland and O'Neill (1998) suggested a commitment to the 'integrity of the environment over time'. Looking both backwards and forwards in time, they advocated seeking ways in which to continue place narratives that acknowledge interdependent human *and* non-human rhythms, dynamics, and timescales. As Roberts *et al.* (2021) summarise, this concept of 'diachronic integrity' centres on "maintaining some form of coherence in a place's 'character' through time" (p. 4). This entails policy and management processes that ask "what would make the most appropriate trajectory from what has gone before?", particularly recognising the diverse lifeforms involved (Holland and O'Neill, 1998: 10, emphasis in original).

Holland and O'Neill do little beyond this to set out what might constitute such an 'appropriate trajectory'; however, they argue that avoiding 'too little change or too much' is critical as both can disrupt place narratives, thereby compromising their integrity. Consequently, they critique those forms of conservation that stifle change and risk "transforming the lived world into a museum piece" (1998: 11), echoing learning from forest ecology where-in prevention of natural disturbance can be as disruptive as creating too much disturbance. By contrast, rapid change can be equally disruptive due to its tendency to exceed 'natural' limits and thresholds. Of course, 'natural' disturbance can be very rapid (wind storms, fires, earthquakes) but most forests have developed a high capacity to recover from such changes. From an ecological perspective, what is problematic is intense and/or frequent human disturbance well beyond the limits of the current natural disturbance regime. Here we might add to consider the disruption generated by rapid land-use transformation – such as large-scale afforestation efforts – which have previously (Kitchen *et al.*, 2006; Tsouvalis, 2000) and may again disrupt senses of place. We return to consider these tensions, and the need for more appropriate forest policy time-cycles and priorities, after we have reviewed the current Brexit window for policy change.

## Brexit

Across the land-use sector Brexit has been seen as a watershed to bring in new policy approaches now that the UK is no longer bound to European policy



stipulations. This is particularly notable in relation to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), prompting a major rethink in the way we reward and incentivise farmers. Whilst forestry is not bound by an equivalent framework, the end of CAP does have a number of ramifications for the forest sector. Perhaps most notable is the sense of opportunity the Brexit transition is engendering for foresters, given the difficulties predicted for the agricultural sector without continued CAP support (AHDB, 2017; Confor, 2018). The UK government (and its devolved counterparts) is seeking to replace CAP with new payment schemes, meaning that the previous model of ‘direct payments’ based solely on farm area (with only basic levels of conditionality) will not continue, leading to a major shortfall in farm incomes (Dwyer, 2018). Instead, payments are far more likely to be contingent on the delivery of public benefits in the form of ecosystem services – including carbon sequestration, water quality and flow regulation, biodiversity and the amenity, or more specifically human wellbeing, value of land – which will potentially prompt a change in farmers’ priorities and land-use practices (UK Government, 2021b; Welsh Government, 2020). Notably, there has been increasing interest in the level of ecosystem services delivered by trees and the integration of trees within agricultural landscapes, often deemed to be in excess of those delivered by agriculture alone; although this is hotly debated (Lamb *et al.*, 2016; Torralba *et al.*, 2016).

What this means for forestry is threefold. Firstly, schemes may be more tailored towards paying land managers that are already engaged in tree planting; secondly, there is now more scope for engaging farmers with tree planting on their land through new payment schemes; thirdly, some farmland could become available for forestry expansion at a larger scale where farmers do not engage with new schemes and chose to withdraw from agriculture entirely. Where land does become available for non-farming uses, there is substantial enthusiasm evident from the commercial forestry sector to use Brexit as a springboard to accelerate conifer afforestation and rejuvenate domestic timber production (Confor, 2018). This is often incentivised by corporate interests seeking to acquire land to secure ecosystem service benefits through tree planting, particularly carbon sequestration (Garside and Wyn, 2021).

The ending of CAP in the UK also has a number of technical implications, which could influence the future trajectory of forest and woodland creation. Linking to the above arguments about the potential for farmers to engage with woodland creation, a notable current barrier is the legacy of the European stipulation that land (for which farmers receive ‘direct payments’) has to remain in ‘Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition’ (European Union, 2013). This means land has to be maintained as farmland and natural processes of ‘vegetation succession’, i.e., natural seed dispersal leading to the establishment of shrubs and trees, and ultimately woodland cover, are not allowed to occur. The presence of trees on land also meant the areas under tree cover were ineligible for ‘direct payments’. Ironically, however, farmers were being paid under a separate stream of CAP to plant trees for environmental reasons. All of this has meant that farmers have previously been actively dissuaded from wanting – or simply allowing – trees

to grow on their land, which could now change leading to a marked transformation of our rural landscape.

Looking more specifically within the forestry sector, Britain's departure from the EU could mean an end to, or significant relaxation of, regulatory requirements for full Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) before permission can be granted for large-scale woodland and forest creation schemes (Bond *et al.*, 2016). The EIA rules meant that the rate of change for the establishment of forest landscapes in the past was significantly slower than it could now be. The underpinning assumption of the EIA process was a 'do no harm' approach that was deeply rooted in European policy thinking (Glasson and Therivel, 2019). By contrast, within the UK, there is now increasing interest in the potential of determining land use/cover change on the basis of whether a 'net environmental benefit' can be achieved (Atkinson *et al.*, 2018).

Departing from the EU means a break with these regulations and frameworks, but it is also coinciding with broader pressures and interests that are strengthening the case for trees. In particular, concerns around climate change have led to ambitious commitments for reduced carbon emissions and enhanced sequestration (UK Government, 2008). This has led to specific commitments for tree planting as a means to deliver on targets for carbon sequestration and storage (Grassi *et al.*, 2017; UK CCC, 2019; UK Government, 2021a; Waters, 2021), and meant that wider environmental initiatives are being tailored to ensure that expansion of tree cover comprises a central component of their proposals (National Trust, *no date*; Rewilding Britain, 2019). A critical issue is the rapidity of change required. It is now widely accepted that carbon dioxide needs to be removed from the atmosphere and its carbon securely stored in the shortest possible timescale for us to avert predictions of catastrophic climate change. This not only adds urgency to the argument for more forests to be established (Forster *et al.*, 2021), but has implications for how we do this and what types of forest landscape result, which we explore in the following section.

Alongside the government mechanisms outlined, which serve to replace previous EU agricultural payments, there is increasing interest from the corporate sector in tree planting as a means to offset their emissions, operating in accordance with the UK woodland carbon code.<sup>1</sup> This is leading to increased pressure on rural land to serve these needs and in some instances is leading to a change in land ownership where corporations wish to buy areas for this purpose, resulting in considerable controversy about impacts on the continuity of rural communities and culture (Westminster Hall Debate, 2021).

Taking these increasing pressures to enhance levels of afforestation together with the potential windows of opportunity outlined – for tree cover to replace areas of farmland and for more rapid processes of change to occur without the EU EIA stipulations – we see the potential for significant land use/cover change to occur in the UK within a short space of time. Set against these pressures for rapid change, there are also indications of policy development over longer than usual time horizons emerging post-Brexit. Two of the clearest manifestations of this are *A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment*

(UK Government, 2018) and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (Welsh Government, 2015). This may signal learning amongst contemporary policy stakeholders and present an opportunity to capitalise on wider acceptance of adopting longer-term perspectives going forward. In the following section, we consider the impacts of these different pressures in our post-Brexit landscapes and what considerations need to be taken into account in light of the past tensions outlined earlier.

### *Afforestation policy scenarios*

Here we consider two post-Brexit forest policy scenarios mapping different routes towards the expansion of woodlands across the UK and considering the form and function that trees could take there-in. Whilst the expansion of woodland cover within rural landscapes is the central goal, open questions remain regarding how, and in what form, this expansion will occur.

The critical dichotomy between our two scenarios is the rate of change. Urgency and society's need to respond to the climate 'emergency' underpin the rapid changes sought within the first scenario. Within this, carbon management is the priority with carbon sequestration the central forest 'product' – although trees and forests can play a wider role within society's response to a warming world where this complements carbon management. The second scenario is founded upon a commitment to maintaining diachronic integrity as society transitions to a more wooded landscape. This scenario adopts a 'long view' within which non-human agency can play a more prominent role, and demands a much greater role for adaptive management approaches that enable a more flexible approach to the production of human benefits from forests. These distinctions lead to differences in the resultant types of forest and tree established; how forest/woodland creation is incentivised and facilitated; and who is involved in tree planting/establishment and management. To some extent, these scenarios are two 'extremes' of what transition could look like in the post-Brexit era. We do not seek to advocate one or the other and envisage that the optimal pathway would likely be between the two.

### *Scenario 1*

#### *Policy*

In response to continuously increasing evidence of the climate emergency and ever greater calls for action from the public, the UK government seeks rapid afforestation entailing extensive land cover change in a short timeframe. High targets are set for the area of planting to be achieved within five to ten years. Policy focuses on ambitious carbon sequestration targets above and beyond wider objectives for the provision of other ecosystem services, although the multifunctionality of forests is acknowledged and present as a secondary consideration in the policy portfolio.

Afforestation is supported primarily through financial mechanisms including generous grant aid, tax relief, and effective carbon markets and offsetting. This attracts investment from stakeholders well beyond the established land management sector, including industrial actors and international financial institutions. Policy support does not extend to measures specifically aimed to maintain marginal farming or support diversification activities to keep farming families *in-situ*. There is also a significant upturn in government and private investment in the development of wood processing industries and other bio-economies, which draw through an increase in the intensity of management of the existing forest as a sustainable resource – bringing additional carbon management benefits. Given the strength of commercial norms and drivers, new tree cover primarily takes the form of large-scale plantations with proven capacity for rapid carbon sequestration. These are often monoculture conifer plantations although new forms of more diverse plantation forest emerge offering greater resilience of timber production under conditions of a changed climate alongside other ecosystem services.<sup>2</sup>

### Outcomes

With the presence of sizable financial capital interests and without continuation of the levels of support provided by the EU CAP, marginal farming enterprises become vulnerable. Some farmers decide to leave farming given the economic pressures and lack of interest by their children in sustaining the ‘family farm’. Many farmers and other existing land owners access funding (both public and private) to plant trees on their land, often fast-growing plantations but including the adoption of some carbon-sequestering agroforestry systems. However, significant areas of farmland are acquired by investors who establish conifer plantations in larger blocks with the aim of offsetting the carbon emissions of their other activities. Many local landscapes quickly alter in appearance and aesthetic. Existing rural economies and cultures in these locations are consequently negatively affected. In particular, farm enterprises lose out in the conversion from agriculture to forestry, where tree planting is poorly integrated with, and less sensitive to existing farm operations. Even where farming families remain resident in these areas, the abatement and reduction of farming activities have knock-on impacts on existing subsidiary industries and services. The subsequent loss of community and the existing shared cultural heritage associated with farming (Wynne-Jones *et al.*, 2020) is substantial. Some compensatory growth in the rural economy and employment is seen in forestry and associated wood processing industries, alongside sectors well aligned with plantation forest landscapes including outdoor recreation. Furthermore, the increased growth and availability of good quality ‘home-grown’ softwood timber from conifer trees sparks a boom in its use for construction purposes. The conversion of trees into such products, with a long lifespan (Forster *et al.*, 2021), brings significant cumulative carbon sequestration benefits. In particular, rapid afforestation to address climate change aligns with ambitions to expand commercial forestry, given the mutual focus on large-scale conifer plantations.

The prioritisation of carbon sequestration leads to trade-offs with the delivery of some other ecosystem services, much like in Britain's past when singular planting interests were prioritised on a large scale. Water quality and some components of biodiversity are negatively impacted, especially during the initial forest establishment phase, though many express confidence that these can be minimised through 'best practice' (e.g., adherence to the UK Forestry Standard) and the evolution of new forms of more diverse plantation forestry. Even where others dispute this optimism, there remains a powerful argument that the urgency of the global climate emergency (and the threat that it poses to global biodiversity as well as human wellbeing) means that these negative impacts on UK landscapes are a 'price worth paying'.

The urgency of the policy response and rapid transformation in the economic context for forestry leads to difficulties monitoring and verifying actual carbon gains from afforestation, with some planting occurring where this does not result in worthwhile carbon sequestration (e.g., on peat soils). Whilst official standards and government incentive structures seek to deter such planting via a 'right tree, right place' policy, the loss of in-depth environmental impact assessment (demanded under European law) and availability of alternative funding sources and high demand for carbon emissions offsetting projects and timber continue to drive less-considered approaches to afforestation. Consequently, in the long-term, the overall net contribution to climate change mitigation and other ecosystem services provided by forestry may be less than that claimed by its advocates.

## **Scenario 2**

### *Policy*

Aware of the profound multifunctionality and heterogeneity of land, and seeking to future-proof and optimise adaptability of the forest resource, the post-Brexit UK government seeks afforestation in such a way as to prioritise socio-ecological (diachronic) integrity. Ambitious targets are set for increasing tree cover across UK landscapes; however, these are cast over the next 100 years. This builds on, and radically extends, the ambition for longer-term thinking set out in the current 25-Year Environment Plan (UK Government, 2018) and Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (Welsh Government, 2015). This commitment is made in recognition of the need to account for both human and non-human timescales in sustainability planning. Policy prioritises local alongside 'global' objectives, acknowledging the likelihood that where dramatic land-use change is incompatible with local societal demands it is unlikely either to be achieved in the short-term nor sustained in the longer term.

Policy seeks a gradual transformation of rural landscapes, with more diverse and often less extensive forms of afforestation that are sensitive to the existing character of urban and rural places – including the subjective values of resident communities. Environmental objectives, including carbon sequestration, remain an important element of forest policy; however, policy goals are broad and

adaptive (and, therefore, less prescriptive in terms of ecosystem service delivery). Public resources are split between limited investment in forestry sector infrastructure development and policy measures to support alternative forms of enterprise and the gradual transition of farms, and rural communities more broadly, to more diverse and resilient modes of enterprise and cultures.

Considerable effort is expended to empower the capacity of local stakeholders to collaborate in collective decision-making about the future trajectories of their place including identifying the contribution that trees can make. Regulatory and financial measures are in place to constrain external investment in land purchase, and to ensure that existing rural landowners can fully access and benefit from support schemes. This means that change in landownership is limited and some continuity within rural communities maintained.

Financial support and incentivisation are realised through a combination of public, private and charitable funds. Investment in novel market development (i.e., carbon markets) is limited, given the lack of such a singular emphasis on the short-term carbon benefits of tree planting. Equally, direct large-scale tree planting incentives are limited. Policy is instead focused on encouraging forms of afforestation with lower initial costs and requiring less intervention in existing rural land-use systems. These include agroforestry, continuous cover forestry and natural colonisation (potentially associated with rewilding), which is now permissible given the relaxing of former EU 'Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions'. Within this support, priority is also given to the re-establishment and restoration of hedgerow trees, shelterbelts and wood pasture – in many landscapes acknowledging their greater presence in the recent past and thus strengthening socio-ecological integrity. Significant resource is also invested in increasing urban tree cover with its high level of associated public benefit.

### *Outcomes*

Afforestation rates across the UK increase meaningfully, but in the short and medium term make only a limited contribution to mitigating climate change through carbon sequestration. The result is a relatively familiar 'mosaic' landscape; although featuring a greater proportion of trees in many areas, increasingly as part of continuing agricultural practice (e.g., for livestock shelter or soil conditioning, or to provide fodder for livestock). Areas of highly productive farmland remain largely free of tree cover. Scrub and transitional woodlands become more familiar and commonplace. Significant co-ordination (and leadership) occurs at landscape scales, resulting primarily in small- and medium-scale planting across diverse ownerships, rather than large-scale plantings on individual land holdings. This planting mainly utilises 'native' species, but not to the exclusion of those 'non-natives' recognised as suited to changing environmental conditions. Scope for commercial plantations remains, but as part of an explicitly mixed and complex landscape and primarily located in areas with pre-existing plantation forests. In the management of these particular forests, maintenance of a continuous cover of trees is a priority with limits on clear-felling patches above a defined size in

order to reduce the impact of harvesting on the socio-ecological integrity of the forest. Significant tree planting (and other ‘greening’) occurs within urban areas as demands for shade and associated cooling effects grow with climate change taking effect.

In the medium and longer term, the outcome of this policy approach is mixed forest systems blending the old and the new, broadleaf and conifer, integrated with diverse land uses. These diverse forest systems are strongly resilient and adaptable, and in some cases strongly productive (Forrester and Bauhus, 2016). There remain, however, numerous tensions with practical management realities and the economics of production forest management (Messier *et al.*, 2021). Compromise solutions for production forests emerge, including planting in a mosaic of smaller monoculture blocks (Paquette and Messier, 2010).

Some change and diversification of land ownership and associated usage does occur. Indeed, there is growth in place-based, community-focused, and other novel rural enterprises – particularly those associated with, for example, the eco-economy, ‘nature-based’ tourism, and health promotion. The highly varied forms of forests that emerge over time are able to provide the suite of venues for these activities, which themselves are effective in communicating and delivering sensitive local leadership and climate change adaptation.

## Discussion

Through the two hypothetical policy scenarios (Table 7.1), we have sought to present and explore contrasting visions for the expansion of tree cover across the UK. They identify different post-Brexit opportunities and each respond to differing policy priorities and feature elements that could be deployed in the post-Brexit context. Indeed, a number of proposed mechanisms already exist in some form. For example, the necessary investment in understanding the contribution trees might make to local areas within Scenario 2 is akin to the Area Statement process already being undertaken by Natural Resources Wales<sup>3</sup>. These ‘documents’ seek to better understand the challenges of managing natural resources for multiple objectives, each prioritised by different stakeholders, in specific localities and how it could be improved. The key distinction between our two scenarios is the attempted rate and spatial intensity of afforestation. Each scenario affords a contrasting level of priority to tree planting for directly tackling the climate emergency through carbon sequestration and its consequent urgency. This is then connected to differences in the type of forest and tree species desired, along with highlighting divergence in the policy mechanisms used and the people who are most involved in and affected by these actions.

Scenario 1 is underpinned by the imperative of the climate emergency and the widely held view that tree planting is the optimal current solution. With the potential for change in the regulatory context and considerable economic shifts, the post-Brexit environment offers a clear opportunity to head along the path of economically driven large-scale afforestation. Whilst a number of potential linked benefits are outlined for the rural economy, especially through the expansion of

Table 7.1 Post-Brexit forestry policy scenario summaries

Scenario 1		Scenario 2	
<i>Objective: rapid transition prioritising global climate change mitigation</i>		<i>Objective: gradual transition focused on maximisation of diachronic integrity</i>	
Policy	Outcomes	Policy	Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rapid transition to meet the climate emergency</li> <li>• Major investment and incentivisation of, short-medium-term benefits of carbon sequestration</li> <li>• Strong and effective carbon markets</li> <li>• Very limited economic protection for marginal land management (especially food production in the uplands)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Widespread conifer plantation establishment</li> <li>• Bioeconomy, biofuel, bioprocessing expansion</li> <li>• Large-scale wood product use (including in construction)</li> <li>• Development of forestry-oriented rural communities</li> <li>• Loss of agricultural community identity, places, and products</li> <li>• Loss of employment in the agricultural sector, which may be partially replaced by greater employment in forestry</li> <li>• Some trade-offs for water quality and biodiversity observed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managed, long-term transition</li> <li>• Assessment and protection of (the recent state of) place</li> <li>• Long-term investment in agricultural diversification processes</li> <li>• Incentivisation of long-term ecological outcomes</li> <li>• Promotion of 'natural' transition, colonisation and regeneration</li> <li>• Continuous cover forestry, mixed woodlands – not clear-felling</li> <li>• Agroforestry – mosaic landscapes rather than wholesale change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resilient forest systems, with more 'natural' characteristics and capacity for adaptation</li> <li>• Long-term adaptation (diversification) of agricultural communities</li> <li>• Greater biodiversity at the local scale due to retention of a higher diversity of habitats, but this will not necessarily extend to the landscape or regional scale</li> </ul>

forest industries, our scenario also clearly identifies the potential trade-offs that could occur for rural communities and the environment arising from the pursuit of such a singular policy goal and the rapid and dramatic change at a local scale that it entails. This contrasts with Scenario 2, which recognises some past follies of short-term forest policy, and associated likely stakeholder opposition, and therefore seeks to grow future-proofed multifunctional forests that maintain diachronic integrity across rural landscapes. Ambitions to increase tree cover



are set over a considerably longer time scale and at a slower pace. This enables attention to be directed towards a more diverse set of policy priorities and creates considerable space for natural autonomy within forests' establishment and eventual form. Yet here, there is the question of whether a more tempered long-term approach to enhancing tree cover, through 'organic', small-scale and integrated techniques, will be sufficient to tackle the climate emergency. Whilst Scenario 2 offers a more measured and potentially, therefore, more socially 'acceptable' approach that avoids sudden dramatic change in both landscape and socio-economic terms, it is highly likely that the unmitigated impacts of climate change would lead to unavoidable critical impacts to these same landscapes and society in the medium to long term.

Whilst there is no question over the urgency of actions needed to address the climate emergency, uncertainty remains about the extent to which tree planting really can deliver a substantial contribution to national goals for carbon sequestration (Grassi *et al.*, 2017). It is often said that we need the 'right tree in the right place', but this implies the existence of considerable knowledge not only about trees, but also about place. It is key to ensure that our measurement and accounting of effective sequestration is careful, nuanced across species, and part of a coherent framework for climate action that reaches beyond forestry (Sovacool, 2021). It is similarly key to understand what, and which actors, make a place, socially and ecologically (Gulrød *et al.*, 2018; Santos Nouri and Costa, 2017). In their analysis of place in intertidal landscapes, Roberts *et al.* (2021) identify the value of 'dynamic stability' as a component of place. They highlight tensions between the notions of 'continuity' and 'integrity' entangled with this and the need to respond (disruptively) to problems caused by climate change-induced sea-level rise. These tensions echo those described above between the need to rapidly sequester carbon and the desire to avoid too much change to landscapes (and places). A forest policy focused on maintaining diachronic integrity over the long term can reach back to understand the social and ecological forces (human and non-human) that have led a place to become what it is, as well as look forward to consider what social and ecological forces may lead it to become in the future. Without this knowledge, the trade-offs presented above could be much exacerbated and the sense of injustice for those most negatively affected could be acute. It is not simply the case of weighing up what is most important (e.g., the viability of farming businesses in marginal rural areas, versus the global climate), but acknowledging the distinct geographies of where action needs to take place to ensure that different priorities can be met. As a consequence, some stakeholders will face trade-offs that others elsewhere will not (Eriksen *et al.*, 2015; Smith and Stirling, 2010). Policy processes need to be in place to account for situations where rural communities suffer serious personal dis-benefits to enable wider public and global goods. These issues have been covered in the literature on carbon offsetting and payments for ecosystem services in the global south, but there is a lot of learning we now need to transfer to a UK context (Shapiro-Garza *et al.*, 2020; Wynne-Jones, 2013).

At a broader scale, there is a need to consider the fit of national policy targets with global measures and objectives, and how action within national territory

can have wider ramifications. Whilst Scenario 1 is clearly designed to address UK policy targets for carbon sequestration, the trade-offs for rural land-use outlined have the potential to increase imports of food produce from overseas. This is a major concern raised by farming interest groups and media objecting to the tree planting agenda (Stanley, 2021). The pressures on UK farming are further exacerbated by the challenging post-Brexit market and reduced levels of government support (as outlined above), potentially leading to further reductions in domestic food production capacity. The impact of increasing levels of food imports into the UK, due to a reduction in food growing area here, would mean that the global carbon budget may not benefit as much as UK carbon accounting would suggest due to 'leakage' of the carbon emissions from the UK to the food-exporting countries (Franks and Hadingham, 2012). By contrast Scenario 2 might reduce this 'off-shoring' effect, by seeking to balance food production with measures to sequester carbon. However, it is important to acknowledge that most of the land of interest for woodland expansion is low-grade agricultural land, which is predominantly used for livestock production. This is a sector where the UK is a net exporter of produce (AHDB, 2017). This presents a complex picture in terms of understanding the overall impacts of reduced agricultural land availability. Nonetheless, the importance of acknowledging national versus global carbon budgets is receiving increasing scrutiny in the process of agreeing collective targets to address the climate emergency (Prudhomme *et al.*, 2021; van den Berg *et al.*, 2020).

Our discussion has highlighted potential trade-offs, but it is equally important to consider the feasibility of the rapid change proposed in Scenario 1. Whilst we observe a clear enthusiasm from the forestry sector for such a dramatic expansion of tree cover, it is not clear whether the mechanisms outlined will be sufficient to lead to the levels of change demanded by new policy targets. Indeed, past forest policy has been notable for its failure to achieve such dramatic levels of change, as outlined in Section 'Past Tensions'. Although both scenarios include a number of marked changes from past EU policy mechanisms and contexts, which are likely to result in more substantive levels of tree planting than previously observed, there is no guarantee that the more ambitious targets set by UK and Welsh governments will easily be met. Scenario 1 clearly sets out to engage with a new set of stakeholders in the mission to increase tree cover; however, they often lack familiarity with the location in question (indeed they may have no existing stake in the particular place). In contrast, the push-back that could arise from longstanding rural stakeholders may be significant (Flechard *et al.*, 2007; Wynne-Jones *et al.*, 2018). A key question, therefore, when comparing the two scenarios, is whether the dramatic proposals of Scenario 1 will be seen too unfavourably due precisely to the rapid nature of the change they could herald. By contrast, would Scenario 2 actually be more successful over the longer term, in achieving higher levels of tree cover, as a less threatening approach? Or would it too be equally opposed by farmers who see their mission as narrowly focused on food production. Therefore, do we need a more dramatic push to change engrained norms around tree planting and to break down past barriers (Scenario 1) or a

more long-term process of adjustment of perceptions and norms within the social component of the socio-ecological system (Scenario 2)? A critical element in the success of Scenario 2, is effective local leadership and participation within forums to express and deliberate the value of trees within our landscapes, and then take these forwards to enable planning and implementation of desirable future landscapes. There are no easy mechanisms through which this can be achieved, but the impetus of Scenario 2 is to acknowledge the importance of values across a community who collectively construct notions of place (Ellery and Ellery, 2019; Franklin and Marsden, 2015). Furthermore, the policy approach of Scenario 2 embeds the potentially critical element of time: time over which inclusive, adaptive planning processes can emerge and over which the non-human agency of the trees and forests can contribute to defining the form and function of the landscape and the benefits it provides, rather than acting as a check on exclusively human ambitions. For Scenario 1, however, the subjective values of communities may tend to be suppressed, with significant risks of ongoing local opposition, as have persisted for decades after afforestation of open land in the vicinity of communities in the valleys of South Wales Valleys (Kitchen, 2013). It would also continue to steadfastly ignore natural rhythms and agency.

Looking to the long term, the scenarios could have very different trajectories. For Scenario 1, it is possible that a lot of carbon storage could be achieved in a relatively short space of time. But over the longer term, it is not clear whether tree planting will continue to be needed to provide the same carbon sink service, if technological alternatives for carbon capture and storage come to fruition alongside other pathways to radically decarbonisation of our global economy (Forster *et al.*, 2021), or if the less diverse forests suffer catastrophic damage due to their lack of resilience to the impacts of climate change. As with some past forest policy failures, future generations could find themselves in a situation where this policy objective expires – once again leaving a legacy forest resource that needs to be repurposed. This makes the trade-offs presented both more and less palatable. Key to resolving the tensions arising will be the adaptability of the forest landscapes that are created. From an environmental and landscape aesthetic perspective, if forests can be adapted over the longer term to take greater account of other priorities, beyond carbon, and maintain their resilience under future climates there is scope for some of the concerns raised to be ameliorated. From a socio-economic and cultural perspective, adaptation may be too late for businesses and communities that have undergone irreversible change. This makes the short-term nature of the changes undergone particularly difficult.

For Scenario 2, gradual change characterised by a strong sense of continuity is key. Maintaining these changes into the longer term will be an essential aspect of this, allowing the forest ecosystems to realise their potential for carbon sequestration and other ecosystem services, as a component of a sustainable socio-ecological system. The consistency of this scenario is attractive in that it avoids policy u-turns, but adaptability will still need to be a core principle as goal setting is less rigid and the forests arising will need to accommodate a range of needs both at any one time and over time. Across both scenarios, then, the importance of an

adaptive policy approach is paramount, even for Scenario 1, which is clearly much more prescriptive and targeted in the immediate goal sought.

Comparing the scenarios, a key question emerges over how we conceptualise our long-term goals, if we aim to meet them through more immediate forms of land-use change, which may or may not become redundant, or whether we consider a different approach to temporality, where we allow change to occur over a longer term and relax our need to 'design the future'. In the latter approach, the rationale is that healthy forest ecosystems will provide useful goods and services but we do not have to over-design and force any specific elements. This gives greater acknowledgement to the agency of trees and other forest species in the development of future landscapes. This is, therefore, not only a question of what time frames and levels of flexibility policymakers can envisage and work with, but the extent to which we can be responsive to the more-than-human elements of our ecosystems.

What could this look like in policy terms? If we want to move beyond a short-term policy focus we need commitment to frameworks where longer-term objectives are sustained across the cycles of government. This requires a shared vision and legislative architecture to be in place, above and beyond individual administration's policy documents, goals and instruments. A clear example of this is the Welsh Government's 'Wellbeing of Future Generations Act' (2015), which has introduced requirements to ensure accountability to the needs of future generations in Wales and to adopt substantially different ways of working within and beyond government (Gonzalez-Ricoy and Rey, 2019). Commitments to future human generations have long been at the heart of sustainability, but this formalised legislative agenda moves beyond adopting longer-term policy visions, such as with Defra's 25-Year Environment Plan (UK Government, 2018), towards a binding legal architecture that enables future human needs to be considered and protected. There is, of course, also a need to shift mind-sets as well as institutional frameworks, although policymakers would intend for such transformations to be interlinked. In this regard, it is notable that foresters, and others working on the land, may find it easier and more intuitive to be attentive to the rhythms and agency of trees and other non-human nature because they have physical contact with the environment. Increasingly experiential and embodied knowledges are being sought within policy processes. An important step could, therefore, be to increase the material engagement and experience that policy-makers have with the natural environments they are setting targets for (Dandy and Porth, 2021).

Overall, our recommendation for the development of post-Brexit forest policy in the UK would be a mixture of Scenarios 1 and 2. It would require significant intrinsic flexibility to enable implementation that accounted for the significant variation in suitability between places depending on the historical land-use legacy and potential futures. However, it is important to analyse the two scenarios because the combination of the policy drivers of the climate emergency and Brexit have the potential to radically shift the balance between the scenarios, threatening highly valued diachronic integrity and social justice as we have outlined. Whilst

the present urgency of the climate emergency, and the apparent opportunities opening up through our exit from the EU, provide both the incentive and window for radical change, our discussion here has highlighted the importance of taking time to attend not only to people's values but also the lifecycles and agency of the trees we wish to see proliferate. Encouraging forest policy stakeholders to take an even longer view than they are used to may be critical to achieving this.

## Notes

- 1 See <https://woodlandcarboncode.org.uk/> [Last Accessed 10/9/21].
- 2 See <https://newgenerationplantations.org/> [Last Accessed 10/9/21].
- 3 See Natural Resources Wales/Area Statements [Last Accessed 10/9/21].

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# 8 Sustainable rural development and rural energy communities in a post-Brexit UK

Paralysis or broader visions in uncertain times?

*Laura Tolnov Clausen and David Rudolph*

## Introduction

Rural areas have become increasingly important for sustainable energy transition, mainly as a resource for the production of renewable energy (hereafter, RE). In this context, political interest has emerged that aims at linking RE development with rural development (hereafter, RD) (ECA 2018). This ambition particularly applies to a supranational European context, where several EU funding programmes are available for intensifying the production and use of RE to support potential synergies with RD. Hence, the development of RE has received explicit acknowledgement at the policy level as a promising means for supporting rural economies (OECD 2012; IEA-RETH 2016; ECA 2018). This is embedded in an increased awareness that rural areas do not merely provide the resources for the production of RE for the benefit of urban growth centres. Instead, RE is also conceived as a lever for the economy and livelihood in rural areas (ECA 2018).

In the UK, the potential of RE for RD has particularly been associated with the idea of asset-based community development (Macleod and Emejulu 2014). Community-driven energy projects have therefore been utilised as a central instrument for combining RE projects with RD goals (Callaghan and Williams 2014), while the potential of this coupling is mainly related to the availability of energy and land resources in rural areas where often disadvantaged regions and communities are located. The development of renewables is then envisaged as an economic driver for these areas, depending on the facilitation of ways and capacities to exploit these resources to the benefit of rural communities (Clausen and Rudolph 2020). However, a decentralised utilisation of RE resources does not automatically translate to meaningful RD and has to be proactively nurtured. This mainly happens through a redistribution and channelling of profits from energy production into the local economy, while addressing social and economic challenges that rural and peripheral areas increasingly face, such as economic decline, fuel poverty, outmigration and the withdrawal of public services. In practice, a redistribution of profits has occurred through the provision of community benefits from utility-scale renewables<sup>1</sup> (Kerr, Johnson and Weir 2017) or the community (co-)ownership of the energy facilities where revenues

are re-invested locally for the common good. Hence, this opportunity has been enabled by RE policies and initiatives in the environmental domain rather than by rural policies.

With the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (EU), it remains unclear as to how this linkage between rural and renewable energy development may be affected. While a lot has been contemplated over potential consequences of Brexit for the energy cooperation with the EU (e.g., Little 2018; Cairney *et al.* 2019), considerations dealing with the potential consequences of Brexit for the intersection of rural-renewable energy development are very limited.

In this chapter, we focus on precisely this interrelationship between rural areas and the development of RE in the UK in a post-Brexit situation. In light of both historical policy development and popular movements, we are grappling with the overarching question of whether Brexit may lead to a paralysis of the ongoing processes, or whether the UK's exit from EU could potentially lead to a renewal and upsurge, and perhaps innovative, ways of connecting the two development opportunities. Since the answer is not a simple and straightforward one, various imaginings of the future need to be considered. Thus, we will illuminate different scenarios on the post-Brexit situation, each of which focusing on specific trends, challenges and opportunities that have been observed in policy development and popular movements. Different scenarios are inferred from academic literature, but also policy reviews, white papers, governmental strategies, public debates and interviews (mainly with people on the Isle of Lewis in Scotland, 2019–2021) – not as predictions of the future, which would be beyond the scope of the chapter, but as aggregated expressions of existing tendencies for how energy-related issues may further evolve in a post-Brexit UK. In this regard, they merely serve as socio-technical future scenarios (Konrad and Böhle 2019; Weimer-Jehle *et al.* 2020), which – in their capacity of being future-oriented visions of connected social and technological orders – can arouse reflections and hopefully contribute to stimulate a debate about desirable and less desirable futures – including political incentives that support or avoid particular outcomes.

In order to provide some orientation within the framework of a complex context, a particular focus will be on the so-called “community energy” initiatives in peripheral and rural areas that have been promoted in light of ideals of asset-based rural community development and in response to austerity politics. While our focus is on the UK in general, we also draw on the specific case of Scotland in order to make effects and challenges more tangible. In what follows, we will first outline the EU policies and programmes supporting the interplay between RE and rural areas followed by a description of how this interplay has been governed in the UK and its devolved governments. Third, we will outline overall shifts in RE policies. Fourth, we will provide a reflection on how recent policies and trends towards rural energy transition may be impacted by Brexit. This includes the illustration of four scenarios sketching out potential configurations of the interrelationship between rural and renewable development in the UK after Brexit. The conclusion provides a brief general reflection on the issue.

## **Renewable energy within the EU's rural development policy framework**

Putting emphasis on the linkages between rural and RE development is not a new phenomenon. In some countries, for example, Denmark, this link has been supported by national energy policies since the 1970s based on considerations of the need to support local solutions to secure the energy supply and support national industries (Christensen 2013). While emphasising potential synergies of development, the coupling has been argued to be an effective way of implementing RE technologies, while at the same time contributing to the advancement of RD (Lovins 1977; Hofmann and High-Pippert 2005).

At the international policy level, the expansion of RE has received explicit attention as a promising means for advancing RD and boosting rural economies within the last decades (OECD 2012; IEA-RETH 2016; ECA 2018). Several evaluations and supranational policy documents indicate that RE projects can be established in ways that benefit sustainable RD (OECD 2012; IEA-RETH 2016; Nordregio 2017). In order to maximise the economic benefits of RE deployment for rural areas, these evaluations highlight approaches to RD that are embedded in local conditions and focus on the competitiveness of rural areas (Clausen and Rudolph 2020).

At EU level, the policy framework for RE also started to promote RD through the designation of specific funding programmes and focus areas (ENRD 2015). Not least, the Renewable Energy Directive (RED) from 2009 (European Parliament 2009) and its recast RED II from 2018 (European Parliament 2018) include references to the opportunities, renewables may have for regional development, especially in rural and remote areas (ECA 2018). The initial interest for the coupling can be seen in light of the overall goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, reduce the EU's dependence on fossil fuels and imported energy, thus increasing energy security (ECA 2018: 10). The key element of the EU's current RE policy framework – the RED – is an integral part of the EU's climate and energy packages. The 2020 climate and energy package (European Commission 2009), put in legislation in 2009, set the target of 20 percent of the energy consumed in the EU in 2020 to be produced using renewable resources, hence requiring Member States to adopt National Energy Efficiency Action Plans (NEEAP). Later, as part of “Clean energy for all Europeans” package, the European Commission in 2016 proposed an update of the RED for the period from 2021 to 2030, called RED II (European Commission 2016). Ratified in 2018, the new directive established a binding RE target for 2030 of at least 32 percent. With this came also a series of measures for “making the European Energy sector more secure, more market-oriented and more sustainable” (European Commission 2016), hence urging EU Member States to put in place special protections for local non-profit initiatives that could boost the production of RE and help them reach their national renewable energy target. It includes a variety of financial incentives, such as feed-in tariffs (FITs) or feed-in premiums (FIPs), and measures, such as quota obligations with tradeable green certificates.

Both RED and RED II determine that legislative and policy documents also identify the potentially positive impact of RE on RD. This complies with the references made by RED and the RED II proposals to the opportunities presented by RE for employment and regional development, “especially in rural and isolated areas” (recital 1 of the RED and recital 3 of the RED II (European Parliament 2009: 1; European Parliament 2018: 1). RE is a cross-cutting priority relevant to many EU policy areas, including RD policies (ECA 2018: 17). The EU provides support for RE under several funding programmes, which include the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) as well as the Horizon 2020, LIFE and LEADER programmes, which have long endorsed bottom-up initiatives for rural development (Ray 2001). Within the framework of RD policy, investment support for RE deployment is subject to shared management by the Commission and the Member States since Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) are drawn up by the Member States and approved by the Commission. Based on the programmes the Member States then select the projects to which funding is allocated. The Community Strategic Guidelines for Rural Development for 2007–2013 (European Commission 2005) and Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005/19 (The Council of the European Union 2005) also take these issues up in the context of the RD policy framework. The considerations on the potential of RE in rural areas was, for instance, expanded in the “Health Check”, a reform package of the CAP which the EU’s agriculture ministers agreed in November 2008. Here RE was recognised as one of six “new challenges”,<sup>2</sup> and further, in the 2014–2020 programming period, the EU support for RD, including support for RE projects, was delivered within a new framework. The EAFRD had become one of the five European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIFs), which, as an overall framework intended to better coordinate and improve the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (ECA 2018: 19).

### **Linking EU renewable energy and rural policies with policies in the UK**

At the national UK policy level, the efforts to linking RE and RD must be seen in the light of both national political organisation and influence from the EU. Apart from Northern Ireland, energy policy is not a devolved matter and sits with the UK government. Thus, the UK government determines the overall energy policy, including the regulation of a common electricity market and the support mechanism for renewable energy. Only Northern Ireland is a distinct insofar as it shares a single electricity market with the Republic of Ireland, which results in the greatest level of legislative agency on energy matters, despite having the least political capabilities to deliver a coherent energy vision and having to abide by certain EU laws regarding the electricity market (Muinzer and Ellis 2017). In contrast, the Scottish government has been able to direct the course of RE developments in Scotland by making use of its sovereignty in spatial planning and by controlling subsidy levels for particular energy technologies (see Cowell *et al.* 2017 for more detail). This means in practice that the Scottish government can deny

planning consent for certain types of energy infrastructures, like nuclear energy facilities, while providing targeted financial and logistic support for others, like community wind turbines.

Regardless of internal self-determination, the UK, just as other EU Member States, had to comply with EU climate goals (Cowell *et al.* 2017). Thus, the UK not only moved steadily towards, but also increasingly helped to define the EU mainstream on climate change policy (Grupp 2002: 139). This mutual influence reflects devolved environmental responsibilities as well as a re-scaled shift from “government to governance” (Swyngedouw 2005) in international environmental policy – in accordance with a decentralisation and decline in the directing role of the state. This particularly applies to the UK, which had long made a name for itself by trying to avoid adapting to EU Climate Change policy. As described by Grupp (2002: 141), the UK used to be early on “somewhat adrift from the European mainstream on climate change policy and closer to the US”. Accordingly, the key characteristics of the British energy regime from the 1980s until the mid-2000s have been described as large-scale, centrally planned and private sector-led (Walker *et al.* 2007). Despite a greener agenda from the 2000s onwards, this approach continued with the transition from fossil to RE. Hence, the framework for market support for RE that targeted and was effectively exploited by large, incumbent energy corporations rather than smaller new entrants (Strachan *et al.* 2015) reflected the embeddedness of energy policies in UK’s liberal market economy (Ćetković and Buzogány 2016).

However, along with the green energy transition and international consensus to tackle climate change, including the increased interest in linking RE and RD, some significant changes in the political focus also took place (Braunholtz-Speight *et al.* 2018). Such a change arose not least, when the term “community renewables” became part of UK energy policy (Walker and Devine-Wright 2008). Community renewable energy refers to RE initiatives and projects that are wholly or partially owned and managed by community and collective organisations constituted as for-, or not-for-profit organisations (Berka and Creamer 2018: 1). Operating across a geographically defined community, they are designed and driven by local residents and ideally involve an empowerment of communities to obtain more autonomy to address local needs – including achieving social economic and democratic benefits (van Veelen 2017; Berka and Creamer 2018).

In a UK context, and despite the continued prioritisation of a fossil-based growth imperative, the emergence of community renewables reflected an effect of the EU upon UK climate change policy. While the UK started in the 1990s to transform from being a taker of EU policy to proactively trying to shape green energy policy (Burns and Carter 2018: 2), this momentum gained traction in the new millennium and the UK became a key voice not only on climate change at the European level but also on community RD (Burns and Carter 2018). A central shift in this regard came in 2007, when the UK government signed on to the EU’s “20-20-20” targets and the subsequent adoption of the UK Climate Change Act (CCA) (2008)<sup>3</sup> compelled the UK to adopt a more interventionist and ambitious energy policy. As the EU required new incentives, subsidies and planning

approaches for renewables (Carter and Jacobs 2014), community RE emerged as a new policy tool to help achieve a low-carbon energy transition (Walker *et al.* 2007; Seyfang, Park and Smith 2012).

A series of central government-funded programmes following the CCA further positioned this strategy as these served the aim of supporting, facilitating and subsidising the establishment of “community” RE projects (Walker *et al.* 2007: 65). Especially the introduction of feed-in tariffs in 2010 boosted the formation of community-driven energy projects which were disproportionately initiated in rural areas (Braunholtz-Speight *et al.* 2018). Likewise, the establishment of community energy projects in Scotland received financial and logistic support from the Scottish Government administered by Local Energy Scotland and Community Energy Scotland (Slee and Harnmeijer 2017). In 2014, the UK government also published the first-ever Community Energy Strategy, presenting a de-centralised vision of energy transitions in which communities would play a leading role (Devine-Wright 2019). Together, these politics led to a short-lived boom of local and community energy initiatives and a rapid rise in the number of cooperatives in the period 2010–2015 (Sweeney, Treat and Shen 2020: 36).

The EU formally acknowledged and backed “community energy” in their own right in the recast of the RED II only in 2018, as part of the “Clean Energy For All Europeans Package” (Hoicka *et al.* 2021). In particular, the 2019 Internal Electricity Market Directive mentions and addresses “Citizen Energy Communities” as an “inclusive option for all consumers to have a direct stake in producing, consuming or sharing energy” (European Parliament 2019: 6). Although this Directive recognises community energy projects to “have delivered economic, social and environmental benefits to the community that go beyond the mere benefits derived from the provision of energy services” (European Parliament 2019: 7), it emphasises the significance in sharing electricity and taking up technologies as well as the necessity of a level playing field to participate in competitive auctions. Thus, the EU’s understanding of community energy appears to resonate with ideals of converging an internal energy market and further rolling out privatised solutions to the climate crisis (Sweeney, Treat and Shen 2020), rather than enabling social transformations and rural development.

On the other hand, whereas UK policy incentives clearly emphasised the prioritisation of rural renewable community projects as a contribution to achieving climate goals it has, from a local perspective, been argued that in many cases community energy was primarily perceived by local communities as a tool for local economic development and regeneration (Walker *et al.* 2007: 73). Hence, although many community energy initiatives were guided by climate change concerns, the main driver behind the local enthusiasm in rural areas was the potential of economic injections for local development. As argued by Wokuri (2021), this dimension is also key to explaining why organisations like the National Trust, which are not involved in RE development, or even organisations that tend to be sceptical about RE projects, like the Campaign to Protect Rural England, support community energy initiatives.

Additionally, while RE policy enabled a less explicit, yet a fruitful, link between energy-related interests and economic development in rural areas, rural policies

have less productively embraced the potential of RE. Rural policy in the UK has been confined between increased policy convergence encouraged by the EU and national policy divergence under devolution (Keating and Stevenson 2006), but has, from an overall perspective, changed little since it was formed (Shucksmith 2019). It has been dominated by a sectoral approach largely focusing on agricultural matters and the environmental protection of the countryside rather than an integrated and broader rural policy that address the needs and opportunities of changing rural communities (Shucksmith 2019). On the other hand, the EU encouraged their member states to establish broader RD programmes in order to qualify for EU funding schemes, which are administered by the devolved governments in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Furthermore, similar to energy governance, rural governance in the UK has also been claimed to be increasingly permeated by a neoliberal agenda portrayed as community empowerment, self-determination and localism that advocates the freedom and responsibility of local communities to determine and influence asset-based social and economic development opportunities (MacLeod and Emejulu 2014). This may be particularly apparent in the Scottish context where community empowerment, both in energy transition and RD, has not least been a central pillar of the Scottish Government, as reflected in UK Community Energy Strategy (DECC 2015) or the Scottish Community Empowerment Action Plan and the subsequent formalisation in the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act (2015) (Dinnie and Fischer 2019). This strategy is also reflected in the ambitious goal to produce 2 GW of electricity capacities from community and locally owned RE projects (Scottish Government 2017) – an approach that reconsiders the role of the state from a provider of services to an enabling actor facilitating the ability of people and communities to do things for themselves (Markantoni *et al.* 2018). However, while this approach is claimed to consider empowered and engaged communities as key actors in delivering solutions to long-standing inequalities in times of austerity (Burkett 2011; Lacey-Barnacle 2020), it has, in turn, been criticised for merely justifying the withdrawal of the state, creating intercommunal competition and reproducing structural inequalities already affecting marginalised rural communities (Catney *et al.* 2014; MacLeod and Emejulu 2014).

In short, it can be argued that the interplay between RE and RD has, paradoxically, been discursively shaped by EU rhetoric and practically “realised” by UK policy strategies that advance community empowerment and localism in light of a rollback of the influence of regional and central government bodies from local and rural matters. At the same time, the discrepancy between the EU’s intention to endorse community energy projects and their parallel shift towards market-based development approach for renewables presents another paradox that has also been reflected in the UK RE policy (Clausen and Rudolph 2020).

### **Shift in policies and practice**

The critique outlined above has been further reinforced in light of recent developments. Not long after the shift towards community-based interventions in rural

areas, developments in UK RE policies began to move in the opposite direction. Following the start of the Tory government in 2015 (Devine-Wright 2019), RE policies became more dismissive towards the establishment of RE projects on land, especially wind farms, while favouring large utility-scale projects offshore. Thus, the rationale for the introduction of an auction-based support system for RE projects (*Contract for Difference*) in 2014 (DECC 2017; Wood 2017) was founded in desired cost reductions in subsidies through the preference of larger projects (economy of scale). Levies imposed on electricity bills (Carter and Clements 2015) and an abolition of regional powers for technology-specific support levels (Berka, Harnmeijer and Slee 2017; Cowell *et al.* 2017) were included in this, however, these developments only pre-empted the already planned shift of the EU towards more market-based auctions for allocating subsidies for RE projects. In April 2014, the European Commission published its revised “State Aid Guidelines of Environmental Protection and Energy 2014–2020” (European Commission 2014). These Guidelines introduced a shift from FiT to auctions whose goal was to reduce the costs of renewables across Europe (Sweeney, Treat and Shen 2020: 19). The new system is based on procurements auctions in which typically a certain amount of power (MW) or energy (MWh) of renewables is offered for bidding (Alvarez *et al.* 2017). The shift formalised what key Member States – such as the UK – had already started to do and instigated the end of the widespread FiT system across Europe. Yet, the UK Government went a step further and abandoned subsidies for onshore wind entirely, depriving rural renewable communities from an important economic foundation. The expansion of onshore wind energy has stagnated as a result of the fundamental policy changes, which also had detrimental effects on the community energy sector (Mirzania *et al.* 2019). This is mainly due to the uncertainty regarding the possibility of long-term revenues, which render debt-financed planning and construction costs too risky for communities. However, in order to counteract this development and while acknowledging positive economic effects on peripheral areas, the possibility of wind farm developers in remote islands to bid for subsidies in auctions was reintroduced in 2018. In light of the danger to miss climate change targets and the necessary rate and scale of renewable energy projects required to support the de-carbonisation of the energy sector, the UK Government reinstated the possibility for onshore wind farms to compete in subsidy auctions in 2020. This development is worth noting from the perspective that community energy, and thus an essential link between rural and renewable energy, had already suffered before the exit from EU – not *because* of EU policy, but because of changes implemented by the UK government. Despite efforts and success by the devolved government in Scotland to advance community energy projects, the small overall share indicates that community energy has remained a niche between the state and the market in the UK (Wokuri 2021).

In this changing policy context, the new focus of local energy projects has turned from community-owned projects to local enterprise projects. The latter involve local authorities and private businesses with a focus on growth, job creation, skills and infrastructure improvements, usually led by private commercial actors. According to Devine-Wright (2019: 4), this “shift in UK policy from



community energy to local energy signals an ideological shift in how decentralised energy transitions should take place". While community energy is driven by a communitarian ideology, characterised by empowerment, autonomy, self-sufficiency and local development enabled through energy projects, local energy tends to be reinforced a neoliberal ideology (Devine-Wright 2019). From this perspective, economic growth, well-being and prosperity are supposed to be facilitated through joint energy actions rather than grassroots initiatives (Devine-Wright 2019). Based on these developments, the British government has been overly optimistic when it comes to living up to climate goals after Brexit (Cowie *et al.* 2018). Indeed, UK carbon emission targets are more ambitious than those set by the EU legislation and there is little indication that Brexit has had a meaningful impact on the overall approach taken by the UK Government to climate change and low-carbon transition (Little 2018). The same applies to the even more ambitious Scottish approach and targets. The Clean Growth Strategy of 2017 (HM Government 2017) reiterates the strong links between economic growth, environmental protection and energy transition, and promises vast investments in support of low carbon innovation to deliver a more diverse and reliable energy mix. However, strategies and goals related to RD seem to play a minor part in the Clean Growth Strategy and seemingly remain rooted in sectoral tracks, specifically mentioning the de-carbonisation of the agriculture sector, renewable heat initiatives in rural areas and innovation in forestry. A Rural Development Programme for England and a Countryside Productivity Scheme appear as the most prominent links to bring together RE projects with interests and challenges of rural areas in a post-Brexit UK. Thus, it remains to be seen whether and how RE and RD may be combined in practice.

### **Explorative post-Brexit scenarios**

At the time of writing, it is still uncertain and difficult to make substantial statements as to how the current situation of the coupling of RE development and RD may be affected by Brexit and the directions in which it may proceed. As part of the process leading up to Brexit, various actors, such as researchers, consultants and politicians have prepared scenarios and reported recommendations for energy priorities as part of the decision-making process and negotiations with the EU. The point of departure for such considerations is not necessarily based on questions referring to particular consequences for the development of RE in rural areas, but relates, for example, more generally to overarching issues, such as energy security or the management of climate change. We will draw on such considerations and also reflect upon our own insights from fieldwork in Scotland, while maintaining a focus on the link between energy transition and rural development. We draw on the notion of explorative scenarios to "explore situations and developments that are regarded as possible to happen" (Børjesen *et al.* 2006: 727) by bringing together various perspectives to work out and contemplate on how certain present and past developments may pan out in the longer term. In doing so, we sketch out four explorative scenarios, on which we will

elaborate below. The explorative approach is based on extensive readings of policy reviews, public debates, academic literature and additionally draws on a number of semi-structured interviews. Most recently, this includes 14 interviews with both stakeholders involved in community energy projects and residents on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland, conducted between 2019 and 2021. These interviews focused on opportunities and barriers of community energy. Furthermore, this also refers to insights and impressions gained through fieldwork-based on numerous research interviews across the UK on various issues related to the social acceptance, conflicts and contestations of renewable energy developments as well as renewable energy policies, conducted by the second author in the period 2010–2021. While none of these interviews were particularly tailored to explore the implications of Brexit, issues related to Brexit as part of the wider socio-political context emerged in some of the interviews. The four explorative scenarios crystallised as overall possibilities and conceivable trends derived from the literature and interviews. They are not based on a detailed cross-reading of the material, but more on a continuous recognisability, as they emerged as hints, references and indications in different political, economic, academic and local contexts.

The four scenarios are the following: (a) Brexit will have no immediately tangible effect on RE projects in rural areas; (b) Brexit aggravates the vulnerability of rural communities that are already exposed to economic decline and their ability to benefit from energy transition in a “race to the bottom”; (c) Brexit leads to more difficult conditions to establish RE facilities in rural areas in general; (d) Brexit enables a rise in new decentralised (but potentially “governmentalised”) community-based energy solution in rural areas.

### *Status quo with limited effects*

The first scenario concerns the possibility of a status quo. Although Brexit appears to have a major impact on a number of societal issues, it is not certain that it will have any significant impact on the coupling of RE and RD. The main domestic challenges are still related to the amount of revenues generated through RE production that can be diverted into the rural economy as well as the financial support for planning and developing community energy projects. As the electricity market is UK-based, it is not directly affected, and since maintenance of technology happens from the UK, and so far supply chains for technology imported from Europe (e.g., turbine parts) have only been slightly delayed, real implications have not really been experienced yet (personal communication, Community Energy Scotland, 06/05/2021). An indirect consequence may be related to the potential absence of EU funds for which a few more proactive and innovative community energy organisations had previously applied. The EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement envisages that the UK will cease to be eligible for new financial operations from the European Investment Bank (EiB) reserved for EU Member States (Norton Rose Fulbright 2021). However, in order to provide greater funding certainty, the UK Treasury has committed to underwriting all funding obtained via a direct bid to the European Commission and has confirmed Horizon 2020 projects will

continue to be supported as well as structural and investment fund projects (such as the European Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund) subject to certain conditions (Norton Rose Fulbright 2021). Additionally, support of energy infrastructure projects from the EIB is supposed to be partially compensated by the establishment of a national infrastructure bank to invest infrastructure projects alongside the private sector. The UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) also specifies agreements on subsidies, the use of interconnectors and market regulations now that the UK has left the EU Internal Energy Market (Norton Rose Fulbright 2021). This approach suggests a potential increased flexibility from UK funding. Additionally, it has, on a practical level, been argued how new investment will be put in “levelling up” funds to support “left behind places”, i.e., the post-industrial and rural areas that voted strongly in favour of Brexit (through, e.g., the competitive Levelling Up Fund, the Community Renewal Fund, the future Shared Prosperity Fund or the Community Ownership Fund) (UK Government 2021). The notion of “left-behind places” and the intention to address uneven development by providing marginalised regions with support and opportunities to catch up has become a recurrent slogan in post-Brexit Britain (Leyshon 2021).

Yet, it appears doubtful to what extent these plans translate into a *long-term* strategy for supporting renewable and socio-economic impacting energy projects in rural areas. It can also be argued that strategies related to creating synergies between rural and RE development have already been downgraded not only at EU, but also at the UK level. Hence, rather than being induced by Brexit, the major immediate implications for RE in rural areas is regarded to result from other causes, for instance, Covid-19, which is assumed to potentially be a game-changer for the importance of and the organisation of RE in rural areas (Community Energy Scotland 2020). As described by a representative of one of the community energy trusts on the Isle of Lewis, the pandemic situation may thus have the effect of delaying the experience of the consequences of Brexit, since “[people] don’t feel consequences of Brexit, because they are overshadowed by Covid-19 consequences, unless you import and export, so Brexit will only manifest in a few years” (Personal communication, community development trust, 6/05/2021).

### ***A race to the bottom***

A second scenario implies that the outcomes of Brexit may have major negative implications for the relationship between RE and rural policies. In an overall sense, this scenario must be seen from the perspective that the EU has had a profound effect on UK climate change policy, including a specific interest in the coupling of rural and renewable development. Maclennan and McCayley (2018) hint at the fact that the negligence of rural areas and towns had a major influence on the result of the Brexit referendum, but also warn that those areas are likely to suffer the most from the unpredictable consequences of continued austerity, economic instability and decline in tourism in post-Brexit Britain. Likewise, the

absence of the EU framework setting minimum standards for member states is feared to raise the prospect of a regulatory “race to the bottom” (Burns and Carter 2018: 6), both in terms of maintaining the climate change standards in general and in terms of creating a fruitful relationship between RE and RD. Although the UK Government has been keen to assuage such fears while stressing that the UK can secure a “Green Brexit” reforming key policies targeting rural matters, like agriculture, actual manifestations of reforms on an environmental policy level still need to be seen (Burns *et al.* 2019). Following Brexit, the UK has so far been released from its RE targets under the RED, potentially giving the government more freedom both in the design and phasing out of RE support regimes (Norton Rose Fullbright 2021). In this regard, critical voices have stated that the UK government may not be really interested in decentralised renewable power developments (Sweeney, Treat and Shen 2020). The fact that the UK has recently abandoned or drastically cut FiTs in favour of market competition, while in addition supporting the building of a nuclear power plant,<sup>4</sup> further support that the centralised energy system of the past is considered the first priority (Tsagas 2020). Hence, a crisis-stricken situation, in which the primary matter is to maintain economic activities after leaving the EU, has early on been argued to raise the risk of a “zombification” (Jordan, Burns and Gravey 2016) of environmental and climate change policy. This term is used to hint at the danger of policies and associated institutions not being reformed or updated as deemed necessary to respond to the new situation, thus becoming inert. In terms of climate change policy such a development would not only counteract a potential adjustment and harmonisation of energy policies among the devolved governments, but also jeopardise potential synergies between renewable and rural development. In that case, more responsibility for linking energy transition and RD would need to be taken by the devolved governments, especially Scotland. This fear is also related to a situation where systemic structures and organisations supporting this link have already undergone major changes and have been weakened by austerity politics (Armstrong 2015). Similarly, the neoliberal trends that have already taken place may be expected not only to continue, but also to exacerbate a situation characterised by long-term cuts in public services, the abolishment of organisations supporting community energy groups and an increased focus on national economic growth, as reflected in the shift from community to local energy. As described by Wokuri (2021), these developments make it difficult for community energy to exude transformative power for rural areas, since all resources of community energy organisations are absorbed in the “struggle to institutionalize advantages and to challenge decisions that affect them negatively” (Wokuri 2021: 3). Such a situation would merely allow community organisations to maintain their assets for their survival rather than proactively contributing to RD activities in their vicinity. Without dedicated top-down forces and incentives by the state, that support bottom-up approaches towards local control and capacity-building, it remains difficult for developers of RE projects to achieve more than an increase in national RE capacities.

***Populist headwind against renewable energy in rural areas***

A third scenario relates to the situation where the post-Brexit period leads to an increased demarcation and self-isolation from other European countries. As is the case with a number of other sectors within the EU, we witness the paradox where the EU's ambitions to reform, rescale and re-territorialise energy systems in the EU have been met by protectionist efforts from some political parties, publics and other institutions in the member states (Stegemann and Ossewaarde 2018). It has been argued how, in the years leading to Brexit, right-wing populist discourses reinforcing Euroscepticism were also aimed at EU targets for increasing the production for RE (Batel and Devine-Wright 2018; Fraune and Knodt 2018). Along with anti-immigration arguments and climate-change scepticism, arguments against RE are put forward which are considered to threaten both national and local identity (Batel and Devine-Wright 2018). Such populist rhetoric has also been employed by anti-wind movements which claim to defend democracy from "non-elected, non-local corporate and bureaucratic elites and special business and environmental interest groups" (Barry, Ellis and Robinson 2008: 78), which are not least seen to represent large-scale RE facilities. Likewise, national as well as other European decision-making processes for RE projects can be viewed as opaque, centralised and undemocratic, while depicting a threat to the local countryside, local self-determination and Britishness – or, primarily, Englishness (Batel and Devine-Wright 2018). Since particularly onshore wind has been the subject of planning controversy, and the UK is already marked as one of the most difficult countries in Europe for getting planning permission to build wind farms (Bauwens, Gotchev and Holstenkamp 2016), popular and political opposition to wind energy development may intensify in some areas, while others may remain assertive towards certain renewables. This may be a contributing factor to uneven development and a potential game-changer, which may not only affect the extent to which the relationship between rural and renewable energy development can be realised, but may also have fundamental political repercussions, reinforcing tensions between the devolved governments, while highlighting and challenging asymmetrical devolution settlements (Burns and Carter 2018: 6). For example, Scotland is a major supplier of RE to England, but also disproportionately benefits from a common electricity market by capturing a larger share of subsidies for supporting renewable energy developments (Cowell *et al.* 2017). This raises further questions with regard to the independence movement in Scotland.

Although the local public tends to favour small-scale and decentralised energy schemes due to their potential to contribute to the local economy based on local (co-)ownership, it is difficult to imagine that a decentralised policy directly translates to citizen-led actions that have the primary goal to exploit energy production for the benefit of RD. It is more likely that decentralised energy and rural policies would continue to favour larger projects consisting of public-private partnerships led by commercial actors that tackle climate targets rather than social transformations and inequalities (Devine-Wright 2019) in rural areas.

### **Broader visions of decentralised energy solutions**

Although negotiations and distractions in the aftermath of Brexit may have been surmised to become a threat in terms of losing momentum in tackling climate change and undermining energy transition efforts, there is also the possibility that greater devolution after Brexit may lead to entirely new ways of providing RE solutions. This may not only be true in terms of new forms of technical solutions, but also in terms of organisational models of decentralised energy projects that specifically address the needs of rural areas. This fourth scenario could evolve as a response to the critique of EU policies being too broad and unfocused, whereby Brexit could engender direct and flexible support schemes that boost RE production in rural areas and explore new potentials (e.g., Cowie *et al.* 2018). Considering current political trends towards asset-based community development and the governance regimes that assign the state an enabling rather than providing function, it is not, from this perspective, unlikely that Brexit may prompt rural communities to further exploit the economic robustness of RE infrastructures to substantiate their economy and way of life. Since strengthening the resilience at the community level is part of the UK's national resilience strategy based on a "whole-of-society" approach (Cabinet Office 2021), the Brexit situation and persistent austerity politics may generally urge communities to bear greater responsibility for local matters. This also applies to issues of RE – not necessarily in terms of ensuring the green transition, which rather seems to constitute a positive side effect, but to ensure socio-economic development of vulnerable and marginalised rural areas.

Recent developments have also shown that community development trusts around the UK have begun to carry the burden of social responsibilities for their communities. They step in where public services are withdrawn and where the welfare system fails to take care of local needs by reinvesting their income from RE facilities in local projects (Martiskainen, Heiskanen and Speciale 2018; Wokuri 2021). Depending on reforms in rural and environmental policies, the Brexit situation may potentially render this supportive role of energy communities even more visible. When income from local energy projects is required to cushion the effects of austerity politics, it ultimately redefines the primary function of community energy projects from a pillar of energy transition to an enabler of RD. Thus, new business models of energy projects may emerge that mainly serve to fulfil socio-economic issues. For example, the community development trusts on the Isle of Lewis have been able to divert funds to uphold local public services, such as the delivery of mail and local transport, that were interrupted by the lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic (personal communication, citizen, 30/10/2020).

However, in light of the absence of EU rural funding programmes that were administered by the devolved governments in the UK, a lot depends on how domestic policies may change and how much funding will be allocated to rural areas beyond agricultural interests. Hence, the same situation could also potentially lead to an intensification of governmentality (Bues and Gailing 2016) and de-politisation, which will not promote a coherent and integrated rural-renewable

development. Instead, a Brexit situation can further extend a neoliberal approach to community energy as providers of social services in rural areas, thereby taking on the role of the diminishing state as a protector of economic and social well-being of citizens. The situation where energy communities are stimulated through smaller subsidies for the purpose of acting as a mainstay for social services in rural areas does, from this perspective, not necessarily promote the proliferation of citizens and community ownership as a sustainable future scenario, but can rather be anticipated as a strategy of exhaustion and further decline. Alternatively, it seems obvious to rethink the market and power structures more profoundly (Burke and Stephens 2018) in which the UK energy sector is embedded. The need to comprehensively reclaiming energy systems from a current investor-focused and profit-driven approach to energy transition has been put forward as a suggestion to ensure that public investments both serve the broader public interests and meet climate goals (Sweeney, Treat and Shen 2021). Seen from this perspective a “public goods” framework offers the most sustainable platform for a broad and enduring involvement of (rural) communities.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Current transformations in the energy sector have not only put rural areas and communities on the agenda again and opened up new potentials for development, but also turned rural areas into a contested frontier at which the utilisation, control and profits from RE are negotiated. In this chapter, we have sought to outline various scenarios for the interrelationship between rural areas and the development of RE in a post-Brexit situation in the UK. Each scenario takes a point of departure in political trends and popular tendencies of how energy-related issues may further evolve in a post-Brexit UK. The scenarios outlined are developed on the premise that any attempt to understand the impact of Brexit on the devolved energy system in the UK needs to address a “combination of political, policymaking and conceptual uncertainty” (Cairney *et al.* 2019: 6). In the end, it is therefore not unlikely that we may experience a combination of elements from these scenarios, and, most likely, tendencies not surmised in this chapter. The emphasis itself may, however, turn out to vary and the outcome may not least depend on the link between popular movements in rural areas and the choice of political strategy. In terms of the latter, competitive financial injections targeting left-behind places do rather seem to provide seed money instead of providing long-term certainty for supporting a broader expansion of decentralised RE in rural areas. Experiences have shown that it is not sufficient to provide finance for communities to take ownership and control of their assets in order to compete with each other (Macleod and Emejulu 2014; Markantoni *et al.* 2018). Instead, it is necessary to provide certainty and protection in terms of support schemes that allow them to utilise the resources in an economically viable and beneficial way.

The central challenge therefore is a rift between diminishing strategic and logistic support of rural communities that consider RE as a lever for economic and social development of rural areas, and, on the other hand, a national energy policy,

which is increasingly driven by ambitions to escalate market-driven RE expansions. Thus, as described above, experience has shown that the latter tends to decouple social transformations and RD from RE development (Phimister and Roberts 2012; Ejdemo and Söderholm 2015; Devine-Wright 2019). The inconsistency between stated aspirations towards decentralised RE based on greater community ownership and the turn towards more competitive market-based support schemes for RE that favour larger projects and certain technologies tend to deprive rural communities of fundamental preconditions to effectuate the aspirations. While this inconsistency is not unique to the UK, but similarly articulated in EU strategies and policies, Brexit may still provide a chance to do things differently in this regard. The core issue of combining decentralised RE and RD is to identify new ways of how social innovation can respond to this market trend and counter incumbent actors (Lacey-Barnacle 2020) in order to capture the value of RE for the benefit of rural communities. This fundamentally includes a greater awareness of not necessarily what community energy means, but what it should do (Creamer *et al.* 2019).

Based on such considerations, we argue for the need for alternative modes of decentralised energy production that foster RD. As suggested above, the post-Brexit situation can potentially be seen as a “window of opportunity” where rural and renewable energy development could be brought together. The willingness of communities to actively participate in the energy transition should be supported as a pillar in its own right with its specific goal of promoting sustainable RD, instead of being misused as a stopgap to cushion the consequences of austerity politics. Should this be the case, however, it requires political initiatives that more wholeheartedly support citizen participation, local ownership, collective benefit-sharing in a holistic fashion, not least, new structures in the form of financial and logistic support to promote community-led projects in rural areas. In absence of such initiatives on a national level, they may be evoked by the devolved governments and possibly further reinforce separatist tendencies. Socio-economic inequalities, already existing community-based projects demanding support for their continued existence and a growing local recognition of the need to take local action on climate issues may lead to political pressure and broader systemic change. In consequence, much depends on how Brexit proceeds, what domestic policies emerge, and how networked RD (Shucksmith 2012) can be enabled combining bottom-up initiatives and top-down support and how it embraces rural issues in a more holistic manner.

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## **Notes**

- 1 A utility scale renewable energy facility is one (typically 10 MW or larger) which generates renewable energy and fits it into the grid supplying a utility with energy.



- 2 The other 'new challenges' were: climate change, water management, bio-diversity, dairy restructuring and broadband.
- 3 The CCA established long-term goals in the reduction of carbon emissions.
- 4 The government has said that nuclear is vital for its plans to reach net-zero emissions by the middle of this century [<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-09-24/u-k-exploring-plans-to-build-new-nuclear-power-project-in-wales>].

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# 9 The impact of Brexit on the digitisation of rural areas in the UK

*Paolo Gerli and Jason Whalley*

## Introduction

Digital technologies have become an essential input for the rural economy and society. Access to broadband and the use of digital services has proved to be a major determinant of rural SMEs' growth and internationalisation (Bowen and Morris, 2019). Furthermore, being online is nowadays fundamental to accessing (most) public services and actively participating in society (see Lyon *et al.*'s chapter in this volume). Even foundational sectors such as agriculture, healthcare and education are increasingly shifting towards digitally enabled modes of delivery (Cullinan *et al.*, 2021; Rijswijk *et al.*, 2020).

These transformations have been emphasised and accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, when digital platforms allowed business operations and the delivery of public services to continue throughout lockdowns and despite social restrictions (Phillipson *et al.*, 2020). It is expected that some of these digital innovations will remain in use after the end of the pandemic, with the boosting of the diffusion of digital technologies being commonly recognised as a key cornerstone of the post-Covid-19 recovery (Baig *et al.*, 2020).

However, the pandemic has further exposed the digital divides afflicting rural areas. For example, recent research has highlighted that the shift to online education posed significant challenges for students based in rural locations, where broadband access is of poor quality or completely lacking (Cullinan *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, it has been observed how the elderly have struggled to benefit from eHealth applications due to their limited level of digital literacy (Litchfield *et al.*, 2021).

Bridging the rural-urban digital divide has long been a priority for both national and local governments across the UK (Gerli *et al.*, 2020). Previous interventions were designed and enacted in compliance with the policy frameworks adopted by the European Union (EU) (Falch and Henten, 2018). After Brexit, though, the UK is no longer required to abide by these rules and this opens up a range of possibilities as well as a number of challenges.

This chapter outlines and discusses the implications Brexit has for the digitisation of the rural economy and society in the UK, highlighting both the challenges and the possibilities that leaving the EU opens up. With this in mind, the chapter

is structured as follows: The first section outlines the state of rural broadband in the UK. It is followed by a summary of the EU regulatory framework for broadband and digital markets, detailing how this has been applied so far in the UK. Next implications of Brexit are explored, with a focus on broadband state aid, universal service obligations, mobile connectivity and new regulatory issues related to data-driven applications and smart technologies. Finally, conclusions are presented along with a summary of recommendations for researchers and policymakers.

## Rural broadband in the UK

A significant urban–rural divide is evident across the UK with regard to broadband access<sup>1</sup> (Table 9.1). Looking across the four nations, a consistent pattern emerges: the provision of “decent” broadband is considerably better in urban than in rural areas. This is also true for the UK as a whole. A similar picture is observed when it comes to “superfast” broadband, though it is noticeable that the gap between urban and rural coverage varies across the four nations. In each of the four nations, the coverage of ultrafast broadband is noticeably lower than

Table 9.1 Coverage of fixed broadband in the UK, December 2020

	England		Northern Ireland		Scotland		Wales		UK	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
Decent – 10 Mbit/s download, 1 Mbit/s upload	93	99	81	99	83	99	87	99	90	99
Superfast – download speeds between 30 Mbit/s and 300 Mbit/s	84	98	66	99	72	98	78	98	81	98
Ultrafast – download speeds between 300 Mbit/s and 1 Gbit/s	21	66	17	82	15	60	20	41	20	65
Gigabit – download speeds of 1 Gbit/s and greater	18	26	17	71	13	47	19	19	17	29

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Ofcom (2020a, 2020b).



it is for superfast; broadly speaking, ultrafast coverage is around a quarter of the superfast levels in all four nations. Finally, when it comes to gigabit coverage, the previously demonstrated advantage of urban vs rural coverage is observable. Having said that, it is worth noting that gigabit coverage in Northern Ireland is substantially higher than elsewhere in the UK.

Similarly, the availability of mobile broadband is uneven across rural and urban areas. Ofcom (2020a) estimated that the outdoor 4G data coverage from all operators is available to 87 percent of the rural premises (compared to 99 percent in urban areas). Indoor coverage is even lower, with only 46 percent of rural premises being covered by all operators, as opposed to 86 percent in urban areas. The indoor coverage of rural premises of single operators spans from 68 percent to 80 percent, while in the urban areas is between 93 percent and 98 percent.

Although still significant, the rural–urban digital divide has considerably reduced over the past ten years. Since the early 2010s, new commercial and community-based providers have been deploying fibre networks in rural areas (Gerli *et al.*, 2017). Meanwhile, a plurality of public programmes has been launched to support the supply and demand of rural broadband. Figure 9.1 summarises the major events in the UK superfast broadband market, taking place since the late 2000s.

To date, all the public interventions put in place to sustain broadband supply and demand across the UK have been designed and implemented in compliance with the EU regulatory framework. That framework is outlined in the following section which focuses on the state aid guidelines for broadband diffusion and the regulation of Universal Service Obligation (USO).

## **The EU regulatory framework for broadband and digital markets**

Since the late 1980s, the European Commission and the European Parliament have adopted several measures to regulate the development of electronic communications across its Member States<sup>2</sup>. Initially, the EU institutions primarily focused on promoting competition and safeguarding consumer rights (Falch and Henten, 2018). In 2002 the European Parliament introduced a set of rules obliging the former monopolists to make their networks available to new entrants. Another directive, also adopted in 2002, normed the universal service obligations for telecommunications providers. These were revised in 2009 to include access to Internet (Batura, 2016).

The increasing relevance of digital technologies for economic growth and social development pushed the EU policymakers to follow a more interventionist approach in broadband markets (Falch and Henten, 2018). In 2010, the EU Commission adopted the Digital Agenda for Europe, which committed the Member States to reach 100 percent superfast broadband coverage by 2020. An additional target was set in 2016 to ensure that all EU citizens have access to at least 100 Mbit/s by 2025 (European Commission, 2016).

Given that commercial supply is unlikely to reach these levels of coverage,<sup>3</sup> specific guidelines were designed by the EU Commission to permit state aid in

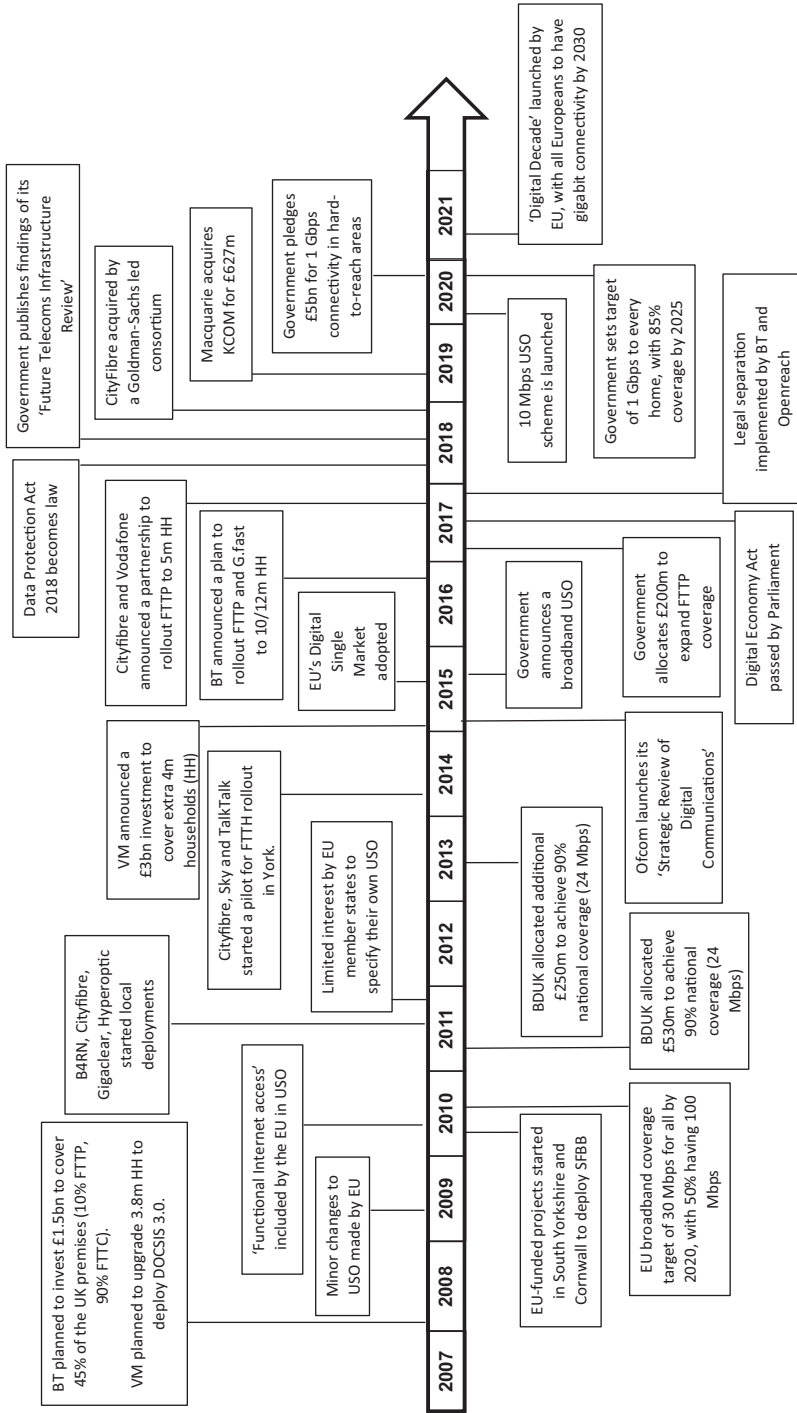


Figure 9.1 Timeline of relevant developments. Source: Derived from Gerli and Whalley (2021).

broadband markets (Koenig and Bache, 2012). Public intervention is admissible only in those areas where the market fails to provide broadband access. Such areas are identified through public consultations, periodically run to ascertain where commercial suppliers intend to invest within a period of three years. This is meant to minimise the risks of market distortions and prevent public interventions from discouraging private investment. The state aid guidelines also mandate that public funding is allocated on a competitive basis (European Commission, 2013).

The EU framework has been enforced in the UK by the Office of Communications (Ofcom), set up in 2003 to both promote competition and safeguard consumer rights in the national telecommunications market. In 2011, the UK government also established Building Digital UK (once known as Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK)), an agency of the Department for Media, Culture and Sport (DCMS) in charge of allocating and managing state aid for rural broadband (NAO, 2013).

Over the past ten years, BDUK has designed a variety of programmes to support both the supply and the demand of rural broadband. Under its supervision, the devolved nations and county councils have invested more than £2.5 billion to subsidise the rollout of superfast broadband in rural areas (BDUK, 2021). BDUK has also funded the deployment of mobile networks in remote locations and encouraged the adoption of full-fibre broadband through direct subsidies or vouchers to end-users.

These initiatives have reduced but not eradicated the rural–urban digital divide, as it remains uneconomic to provide the hardest-to-reach areas with superfast broadband, even with the support of state aid (Gerli *et al.*, 2020). As a result, a divide within rural areas has emerged between those rural communities provided with superfast or even ultrafast broadband and those still unable to access high-speed connectivity (Gerli and Whalley, 2021). Acknowledging the difficulties that had been encountered and the continued unsatisfactory nature of broadband access for some, the government launched a broadband USO in late 2015 that would provide everyone with connectivity (Stocker and Whalley, 2019).

Although the notion of USO was well established in the EU regulatory framework,<sup>4</sup> when it came to broadband the 2009 revision stipulated only that “functional access to the Internet” should be provided (Davies, 2016). As debates continued regarding the inclusion of broadband into the directive, Member States were left to themselves to develop their own national initiatives. By 2011, only three – Finland, Malta and Spain – had used national legislation to specify minimum broadband speeds (Davies, 2016). Both Finland and Spain set a minimum speed of 1 Mbps.

The UK, in contrast, suggested 2 Mbps. If the property could not be connected through a commercial scheme, subsidies of up to £350 would be provided to install satellite-based connections (Jackson, 2015; UK Government, 2015b). Thus, the UK was arguably at the forefront of developments, and the gap with other Member States was further widened with the broadband USO which was set at 10 Mbps (UK Government, 2015a), a figure supposedly sufficient for several members of a family to be simultaneously online (Ofcom, 2015).

Subsequent to the government's announcement of the broadband USO in November 2015, a series of consultations was undertaken by both the government and Ofcom (Stocker and Whalley, 2019). In effect, these consultations provided the detail lacking in the initial announcement. The download speed of the broadband USO was confirmed at 10 Mbps, and eligibility criteria were outlined, determining the number of properties that could receive support and on what terms (see Hutton (2020) for more details). Significantly, these criteria also included who would provide the USO, with BT and KCOM (in Hull) being designated the providers in June 2019 (Ofcom, 2019).

The EU regulation has not been limited to broadband markets. EU institutions have increasingly shifted their attention to the markets of digital services and data-driven applications to mitigate competitive distortions and safeguard the rights of digital users. One of the most well-known pieces of EU regulation in this context is the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), adopted in 2016, which has been taken as a reference by many non-EU countries (Goddard, 2017). More recently the European Parliament has been discussing new legislations regarding digital media and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI). Given the complexity of these markets, the relevant regulatory frameworks are still developing. Meanwhile, the European Commission has opened numerous investigations into the alleged anticompetitive behaviours undertaken by companies with a dominant position in digital markets such as Google and Apple (UNCTAD, 2021).

### **The regulatory framework for broadband and digital markets after Brexit**

The regulatory regime that emerged in the UK from the enforcement of the EU framework is complex and dynamic (House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution, 2004; Sutherland, 2013). While telecommunications is a reserved matter, with responsibility resting with Westminster, the developed administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have developed their own broadband projects,<sup>5</sup> albeit to different degrees and in different ways. Interestingly, the Scottish Government noted the role of BDUK before going on to argue, in essence, that it wished to be more ambitious (Scottish Government, 2017).

With Brexit, the UK can diverge from the EU regulatory framework. So far, this does not appear to have occurred. That the regulatory framework has not yet diverged may simply reflect the relatively short period of time that has passed. It may also be due to the lack of institutional capacity within the UK, which limits the ability of the government to develop innovative policies to tackle the specific challenges faced. Sutherland (2017) suggests the need to narrow the remit of the relevant ministers and enhance co-ordination across the UK, while the relatively low number of civil servants within DCMS noted by Stewart (2016) alludes to its limited capacity to develop policies, especially when the Department's broad scope is taken into account.<sup>6</sup> Focused ministers and more civil servants may result in greater policy innovativeness, reversing the decline that is arguably evident in Cave (2017).

**State aid regulation after Brexit**

After leaving the EU, the UK is no longer bound to comply with the extant regulation on state aid. Nevertheless, the UK government has not communicated any plan or intention to revise the current framework, which remains in force. Consistently, recent initiatives launched to subsidise full-fibre networks are still designed according to the criteria included in the EU state guidelines.

It must be recalled that several commentators in the UK have highlighted a number of shortcomings in the implementation of broadband state aid (Gerli *et al.*, 2020; Hutton, 2021; NAO, 2013). Particular concerns have been raised with regard to the limited competition for public subsidies observed in the implementation of BDUK-funded initiatives (NAO, 2015). As the majority of the contracts awarded by BDUK were won by BT, the former state-owned operator, the latter was able to de facto determine the intensity and allocation of state aid (Gerli *et al.*, 2020). As a result, public subsidies were also utilised in areas already served by community networks or small-scale providers, that, in contrast, rarely benefited from state aid (Gerli *et al.*, 2017).

As documented in Gerli and Whalley (2021), these distortions directly reflect shortcomings in the EU regulation for state aid. The regulatory framework gives commercial providers too much power in the definition of intervention areas and does not include specific safeguards to favour the participation of small-scale providers (such as rural internet service providers or community networks). For example, intervention areas are defined according to the results of public consultations where all commercial suppliers can specify where they intend to invest. Due to their limited resources, small-scale providers have struggled to take part in these consultations. As a result, state aid has in the past been used to deploy broadband in areas that were already connected by these providers. Not only did this harm competition, but it also led to an inefficient allocation of public funding.

Following Brexit, the UK government has the power to define new regulations for broadband state aid that could effectively support small-scale providers, and community networks in particular, whose contribution has been crucial to reduce the rural–urban digital divide (Gerli and Whalley, 2021). Making the process for state aid allocation more transparent and open would enhance the participation of alternative providers, promote competition, and reduce the level of public support needed to deploy rural broadband.

The latter is even more desirable if it is considered that, after Brexit, the UK will no longer have access to the EU funding for regional development that has often been used to support the digitisation of rural communities and businesses. Around half of the projects led by BDUK have received EU funding (Gerli *et al.*, 2020), which was used to support new technology pilots and demand-side initiatives such as digital skills trainings for SMEs.

Such interventions have been inconsistent across the country because of their dependence on funding made available from the EU (Gerli and Whalley, 2022). Leaving the EU implies that rural regions will be unable to fund similar initiatives unless the UK government introduces a new scheme to replace the EU regional

development fund. Given the shortage of digital skills in the UK and their importance for economic growth (EDGE Foundation, 2019), the lack of public interventions in this area could further compromise the ability of rural communities and businesses to participate in the digital economy and society, thereby exacerbating existing digital divides.

### USO after Brexit

Brexit appears to have minimal, if any, impact on USO. With the designation of BT as the provider of USO, progress has been made on providing connections to eligible properties. In October 2020, BT announced that two-thirds of the 610,000 properties identified in 2019 as being eligible had been provided with 4G-based connectivity (BT, 2020). As illustrated by Table 9.2, a significant number of the USO requests were deemed to be ineligible, with the consequence that relatively modest numbers of properties have been connected through the scheme.

While the number of connections is modest, it is worth remembering that they will be transformational in nature, with the connection enabling individuals or businesses to access the Internet and all it entails. Having said this, the speed provided through USO is only a fraction of that enjoyed by others; in March 2021, the median average download speed across the UK was 50.4 Mbit/s (Ofcom, 2021). This highlights the “safety net” nature of the connections provided by the USO, limiting what the properties connected can undertake online.

Although there was some discussion of faster connection when the relevant legislation was progressing through the House of Lords (Jackson, 2017), with 30 Mbit/s being suggested, this came to nothing. It is, however, possible to review the USO (Jackson, 2020b), with the legalisation stipulating that this should occur once at least 75% of premises receive broadband connections with download speeds of at least 30 Mbit/s. Given current take-up rates, the review is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future.

Moreover, when the review is undertaken, it will need to address a series of tensions. As the gap with average speeds widens, the “safety net” nature of USO

Table 9.2 Universal Service Obligation requests and confirmed orders

	2020					2021					
	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Number of requests received	835	1,279	1,526	2,200	2,084	1,412	1,067	962	1,826	1,673	913
Ineligible requests	536	731	781	1,157	1,098	1,006	905	716	1,163	1,137	666
Confirmed orders	11	35	194	151	105	202	84	44	47	46	35

Source: Compiled by the authors from BT (2020, 2021).

will be highlighted. If the USO is to continue playing this role, then it will need to be increased to reflect the range of activities undertaken online, in the same way that the 10 Mbit/s reflected Ofcom's previous assessment of what a family would need (Ofcom, 2015). Setting aside the difficulties of identifying what a family undertakes online, through virtue of being a "safety net" whatever speed is determined will be less, probably considerably so, than that available elsewhere in the country. As a consequence, USO will simultaneously narrow and perpetuate the digital divides that exist.

Secondly, should a range of technologies be used to provide USO? As noted above, two-thirds of the eligible properties identified in 2019 have been connected through 4G. While a 4G connection is better than no connection, wireless speeds are less than those utilising fibre. 5G, which is being rolled out across the UK, is considerably faster than 4G (Curwen and Whalley, 2021) but it will take several years before it is widely available and, even when it is, it will take many years for the remote parts of the country to be covered. In March 2020, the four mobile operators (EE, O2, Three and Vodafone) entered into an agreement with the government to expand 4G coverage in those areas with partial or no signal (UK Government, 2020b). Through their own investment and with financial support from the government, just over £1 billion will be invested to expand their joint 4G coverage to 95 percent of the population by the end of 2025 (UK Government, 2020b). If the roll out of 5G follows a similar pattern to that of 4G, then it will be a decade or so before it is widely available across the UK, with the final push requiring government encouragement.

Satellite broadband could play a role. In November 2020, the UK government completed its purchase of a stake in OneWeb (UK Government, 2020c). Whether the government would have acquired a stake if the UK had remained in the EU is moot, as is the viability of broadband via Low Earth Orbit satellites given that, as Alok Sharma, the Business Secretary, stated at the time of the purchase that the satellites had "the potential to connect people worldwide, providing fast UK-backed broadband from the Shetlands to the Sahara and from Pole to Pole" (UK Government, 2020c). In other words, from the government's perspective, there is a role for satellite-provided broadband. Having said this, it is worth noting that while satellites are able to improve broadband speeds (Beckett, 2021), sometimes significantly, monthly subscription charges are not cheap when compared to the broadband packages offered by Virgin Media in urban or B4RN in rural areas. Improved connectivity will, therefore, come at a cost for users.

### **Improving mobile coverage**

Given the challenges associated with providing fixed broadband connectivity in rural areas, expanding and improving mobile coverage is arguably an attractive alternative. In early 2020, details emerged of an initiative to expand rural mobile coverage. The "Shared Rural Network" would see the country's four mobile network operators invest in their networks to expand their collective 4G geographical coverage so that it will be available in 95 percent of the country by the end of

2025 (UK Government, 2020b).<sup>7</sup> Although the agreement between the mobile operators and the government specified collective UK targets, it also outlined specific objectives for each operator across each of the four UK nations (Jackson, 2020a). For example, to achieve the interim objective of 88 percent geographical coverage by 30 June 2024 (Jackson, 2020a), the specific targets for Scotland were set at 75 percent for EE and O2, 72 percent for 3 UK and 76 percent for Vodafone (Jackson, 2020a).

To expand their coverage of “good quality data and voice coverage” (Jackson, 2020a),<sup>8</sup> the mobile operators agreed to collectively invest £532 million. Another £500 million would be provided by the government. As a result, mobile coverage has begun to expand, with EE, for example, revealing that it would improve its coverage in 579 locations across the UK over the course of 2021 (EE, 2021; Jackson, 2021). While the Shared Rural Network will improve 4G geographical coverage across the country, three areas are expected to benefit the most: Highlands & Islands, Mid and West Wales and the north-east of England (UK Government, 2021b).

5G is the latest generation of mobile technology, with its improved technical performance over previous generations expected to support a diverse array of economic activities (Curwen & Whalley, 2021). The licenses were auctioned in April 2018, with the subsequent roll-out of coverage unsurprisingly favouring urban areas (Curwen & Whalley, 2021). As part of its promotion of 5G, the government announced, in February 2020, that £65 million would be made available to support a number of trials (UK Government, 2020a). £30 million were earmarked to support seven projects identified through the Rural Connected Communities competition.<sup>9</sup>

While these trials may illustrate the benefits of 5G, they did not accelerate its rollout in rural areas. With this in mind, the government announced, in April 2021, changes to planning regulations (UK Government, 2021e). The changes, the government argued, would encourage mobile operators to improve their existing infrastructure in rural areas. This would, in turn, speed up the rollout of 5G (UK Government, 2021b).

### **Emerging issues: regulating technologies and services for rural users**

While a strong argument can be made that the regulatory regime post-Brexit has not changed, it is possible to identify several emerging issues that are likely to impact on rural users in the near future. The first of these sought to improve the functioning of digital markets. Acknowledging the widespread unease at how digital markets operate, the government commissioned a report in 2018 to explore how the challenges these markets pose could be addressed. This report, published in March 2019, recommended that a dedicated unit should be created to support the development of a more pro-competitive approach (Furman, 2019). Complementing and building on this report was another, from the Competition & Markets Authority (2020), which outlined a pro-competitive regulatory regime



with three pillars and recommended the establishment of the Digital Markets Unit. The unit was established in April 2021 (UK Government, 2021a). However, the necessary legislation to implement the new regulatory approach has yet to be enacted. Consultations on the proposals closed in October 2021 (UK Government, 2021c).

The second emerging issue is the apparent willingness of the UK to diverge from the EU's approach to data<sup>10</sup>. While being part of the EU, the UK had, of course, adopted the relevant directives with GDPR coming into force in 2018 (Sandle, 2021). In March 2021, it was announced that the government was considering amending the regulatory regime for data primarily to facilitate economic growth (Sandle, 2021). Interestingly, it was suggested that a “sweet spot” existed between maintaining the protective elements of GDPR on the one hand and the economic benefits of freer-flowing data on the other. In August 2021, further insights into the government's position emerged: the regulatory framework would be changed, to cut costs but also to enable the UK to sign data agreements with countries outside the EU (Scammel, 2021).

But how will these two issues impact rural areas? Digital technologies are increasingly applied in several economic activities, including agriculture and healthcare, where data-driven applications and smart technologies are becoming increasingly popular. Precision farming and other smart farming technologies are expected to significantly boost the productivity and environmental sustainability of the farming sector (Rijswijk *et al.*, 2020). Likewise, eHealth applications and telemedicine promise to improve the accessibility and cost-effectiveness of health-care for rural communities (Peck *et al.*, 2015).

The markets for these technologies and services are still developing, but an increasing number of stakeholders are calling for regulatory interventions to prevent market distortions and abusive behaviours that could undermine the positive effects of these digital innovations (Atik and Bensen, 2021; Svendsen *et al.*, 2021). In particular, given the economies of scale associated with the development of smart technologies and online platforms, one likely scenario is that the various markets that emerge will be dominated by a small number of large companies (Birner *et al.*, 2021; Gerli *et al.*, 2021). This dominance could result in the limited choice for end-users, restricting their ability to move from one supplier to another. This would also result in technology and service providers gaining significant control over sensitive data which may be either personal or commercial in nature (Atik and Bensen, 2021; Senbekov *et al.*, 2020).

Although digital markets have attracted considerable attention in recent years, the Digital Markets Unit is still being set up. Having said this, if progress could be made in areas such as data portability or non-personal data protection, the rural economy and society would undoubtedly benefit from data-driven applications and smart technologies. On the other hand, Brexit also exposes the rural UK to another challenge. The limited size of the national market, especially when compared with that of the EU, may result in the UK becoming just a recipient of digital technologies developed elsewhere. This will, in turn, limit the ability of the UK to influence market developments – for example, in terms of the

digital technologies that are adopted or the approaches to data sharing that are developed.

With regard to smart agriculture, the consequence of this may be that rural users will struggle to find equipment and services that are closely aligned with their needs, assuming that farmers will actually be able to afford to purchase smart technologies and services. Losing access to CAP funding will likely undermine the capability of smaller farmers to keep up with the pace of technological change. Furthermore, smaller farmers are unlikely to possess the necessary financial and human resources to incorporate and then manage digital technologies within their operations, especially if appropriate digital skills training will no longer be available to rural businesses due to the lack of ERDF funding (as highlighted in Section “The EU Regulatory Framework for Broadband and Digital Markets”).

In the context of healthcare, the new measures on data protection announced in August 2021 are expected to boost the development of AI-enabled diagnostics and other telemedicine services (UK Government, 2021d). However, some have raised concerns that the new international data partnerships may result in the transfer of sensitive and personal data to countries where the data protection regime is less stringent (Molloy, 2021). This could have important implications for the acceptance and adoption of eHealth applications in the rural UK. A recent study focusing on Canada found that the satisfaction and willingness to use telemedicine is normally lower among rural households with limited access to and familiarity with digital services (Rush *et al.*, 2021). Concerns regarding the privacy of eHealth may further undermine their trust in these services and their willingness to use them (Gerli *et al.*, 2021).

Some of the emerging issues discussed in this section are already being addressed at the EU level. For example, industry stakeholders have adopted a code of conduct for agricultural data sharing (Copa-Cogeca, 2018) and DG-Health (2021) “has been reviewing the Member States” rules on health data. Although policy measures have yet to be defined, it is likely that Brussels will increasingly intervene to regulate digital markets consistent with its aim of supporting the digital economy while safeguarding competition. The UK government is also taking action in this regard, but a clear regulatory framework is still missing. Furthermore, being out of the EU will likely reduce its ability to counteract the market power of large technology providers with the risk that market distortions may offset the contribution of smart technologies for the sustainable development of rural communities.

## **Conclusion**

Digital technologies are expected to have a transformative impact on rural communities and businesses in the UK. These impacts are multi-faceted; digital technologies allow individuals in rural communities to access services such as healthcare and online education that may not currently be available in rural areas and create commercial opportunities for rurally located businesses. Broadband is at the heart of these changes, being increasingly viewed as essential for accessing

services and engaging in commerce. However, the availability of “fast” broadband across the UK is uneven. This clearly disadvantages rural areas where coverage lags behind that of urban areas. Not only does this limit the ability of individuals to access services, it also restricts the commercial opportunities available to businesses.

Over the years, EU institutions have played an active role in encouraging the provision of rural broadband as well as regulating various aspects of the digital economy. After Brexit, the UK is now able to decide for itself how to address the digital transformation of the rural economy and society. This could be seen as an opportunity to review some or all of the existing regulations to make them “rural-proof”. In particular, the current state aid rules for broadband diffusion could be revised to better support community broadband networks and other small providers who, so far, have struggled to benefit from public subsidies despite their proven contribution to reducing the rural-urban digital divide in the UK.

On the other hand, leaving the EU could expose the rural economy and society in the UK to new risks and challenges, especially if no regulatory interventions are put in place to mitigate market distortions in the development and provision of digital technologies. To date, the position of the UK government on this matter remains unclear. Such a lack of clarity risks stalling the digital transformation in rural areas and thus undermining its potential socio-economic benefits.

Furthermore, due to Brexit, the UK will no longer have to comply with targets set by the EU or coordinate its initiatives with the other Member States. As a result, the promotion of the digital economy and society is left to the enthusiasm of domestic political parties. Having removed the EU as a source of pressure and promotion, it is crucial that governments at various levels across the UK are held to account by other stakeholders, such as Ofcom or the National Audit Office (NAO) whose powers and resources will need to be expanded to ensure their independence and rigour. Similarly, it is of paramount importance to intensify interdisciplinary research efforts.

These efforts should study the effects of smart technologies on rural businesses and communities, in order to detect distortions potentially emerging from the use of digital technologies in agriculture, healthcare and other foundational sectors of the rural economy. The research should also seek to explore the societal aspects of digital technologies, in terms of their use, the associated skills and whether some benefit more than others. Such research would help inform policy and regulatory developments, thereby preventing the risks and maximising the benefits of data-driven applications and other digitally enabled services and devices in a rural context.

## Notes

- 1 Ofcom (2020a) identifies four different types of broadband connection based on the speeds, with the slowest being described as ‘decent’ and the fastest as ‘gigabit’.
- 2 For an assessment of the initial liberalisation agenda see, for example, Ungerer (2013).
- 3 Commercial providers have little incentive to deploy broadband networks in scarcely populated and remote areas, due to the cost structure of these infrastructures. This

explains the existence of rural-urban divide, as documented above, and justifies public interventions in broadband markets.

- 4 For an overview of USO and its development within the EU see, among others, Batura (2016).
- 5 The Scottish Government, for example, has provided over £500 million to support the provision of 'superfast' broadband through the R100 programme.
- 6 According to the government's website, the Department "helps to drive growth, enrich lives and promote Britain abroad. We protect and promote our cultural and artistic heritage and help businesses and communities to grow by investing in innovation and highlighting Britain as a fantastic place to visit."
- 7 Geographical coverage means the proportion of the country where mobile services are available. Given higher population densities in urban compared to rural areas, using geographical rather than population as the criteria for coverage results in service being available over more of the country than would otherwise be the case.
- 8 The government's press release mentions 4G without specifying the quality of the service that is provided (UK Government, 2020b), but it does note in the definition of coverage used by Ofcom which states that coverage is "based on the minimum signal strength required to deliver a 95% probability of making a 90-second telephone call successfully completed, and a 95% chance of getting a download speed of at least 2Mbit/s" (UK Government, 2020b).
- 9 Five of these projects were in England, and one each in Wales and Scotland (UK Government, 2020a).
- 10 This is just one illustration of what appears to be the much broader desire of the UK government to diverge from, or perhaps remove altogether, EU law (Foster, 2021).

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# 10 Sustainable rural communities and patriarchal structures

## The case of Shetland's Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa

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### Introduction

Each year, on the last Tuesday in January, roughly 1,000 men carry burning torches through the streets of Lerwick, the main town of the UK's Shetland Islands. They are led by a group of men – the Jarl (lead) Squad – who are dressed as Vikings and pull a traditional long ship which, at the end of the procession, is burned in the middle of a children's play park. Thousands of spectators look on. Among them are women, but not one is permitted to take part in the procession.

This celebration, marking the end of winter, is called Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa, and it is Europe's largest fire festival. It provides welcome levity in an area that has limited periods of daylight; the Shetland archipelago, located about 600 miles north of the London capital, can experience winter nights that last up to 18 hours (Shetland Islands Council, 2019). The festival has important cultural and historical roots. However, in an era of relative gender equality, it is perhaps a surprise that until only recently, Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa continued to relegate women to the role of spectator.<sup>1</sup>

The festival originates in the 1800s, stemming from what was, essentially, a rebellion against town officials and state, where young men would roll burning barrels of tar down the main street of Lerwick while dressed in various costumes on Auld New Year (Smith, 1993). Afterwards, the groups of men would “guise” – the practice of going house-to-house to bring laughter through telling stories or jokes. The transition from this practice, which was deemed by authority figures as delinquency, occurred in 1878, when, instead of burning barrels of tar, the men burnt a boat. This became a regular event from 1889, when it was recorded that a Viking ship replica was taken through the town, alongside torches similar to the ones used in today's festival (Finkel, 2010; Smith, 1993; Smith, 2021). The historical legacy of the festival can be said to have been cemented by the local poet who wrote the “Up-Helly-Aa song” in 1905, which is still sung every year by the participants.

Although Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa is rooted in historical events, much has changed since its inception. Smith (2021) states that it was originally a “festival of young working men” and that, following the oil boom in the 1960s where the Shetland Islands economy rose significantly, the festival morphed into its

present-day form of expensive costume and extensive organisation. A nod to the Norse culture and historic influence on the islands has been introduced, with the Jarl Squad being distinguished by wearing Viking outfits (Brown, 1998). Now, on the day of the festival, the Jarl squad is handed over the keys to Lerwick by the Shetland Islands Council Convener during a civic reception, which hosts many of Shetland's bourgeois figures, such as the Chief Executive of the Shetland Islands Council and the Lord Lieutenant (Finkel, 2010). The Jarl Squad then travels around Lerwick visiting many local venues such as local primary schools and social care homes, bringing cheer and building excitement throughout the day. The celebrations reach a crescendo for the younger generation during the torch-lit parade through the designated street procession, accumulating in the burning of the galley boat, built throughout the previous year.

The organisation and labour which goes into the day begins much earlier, with the Jarl, head king, being elected 15 years in advance (Brown, 1998). This is for multiple reasons. First, the lengthy preparation period serves as proof of participant dedication to the festival. Much time is also required for the designing of outfits. Finally, as the cost of participating in the Jarl squad can run to thousands of pounds, it is necessary to allow participants time to make savings, and for payments to be made manageable (Brown, 1998).

The festival is undoubtedly a large aspect of Shetland's culture and one which many regard to be a highlight and source of pride, being an example of the community strength and hard work of Shetlanders, and thus the value of dedication and unity evident within the peripheral islands. However, in recent times, there has been an increasingly critical spotlight shone on the festival. It is men who take part in the main procession; the women's role is that of either being a "hostess" or simply attending one of the eleven local halls (Up-Helly-Aa Committee, 2019a). The members of the squads, or "guizers", travel around the halls after the burning of the galley, throughout the night until the following morning, performing plays and dances with reference to both local and wider issues with a humorous tone (Up-Helly-Aa Committee, 2019a). The division of the roles which are played out by the genders reflects a traditional rural society, with men being the active agents and women playing the supportive role (Shortall, 2014). But, in the 21st century, this is deemed outdated, where the division of activities is purely based on an individual's sex.

Subsequently, there has been debate among the Shetland population regarding whether women should be allowed into the Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa as guizers (Murrie, 2018). It has created a split amongst the population, which attracted the attention of both local and national media coverage, including a BBC short film on the gender debate, which included interviews with locals and a former Up-Helly-Aa Yarl (Constable and White, 2019; McLaughlin, 2019; The Press and Journal, 2019). This divide has been widely discussed across various social media platforms, with many heated debates and posts being avidly followed and commented upon by locals. This has resulted in a polarisation across the islands, to the extent that the Shetland Islands Council's Chief Executive called for an end

to the population debating the issue in a manner that resulted in “an environment where people go silent through fear” (Marter, 2019a).

The debate stems back to the 1980s and can be aligned to wider themes of the rise of polarisation on current topics across the western world. Polarisation is defined as “the fact of people or opinions being divided into two opposing groups” (Cambridge University Press, 2022). It is evident in issues such as the Brexit vote (Remain or Leave) and most recently in COVID-19 vaccinations (pro- and anti-vaxxers), where people are largely defined by their opinion and with which camp they identify, leaving little room for common ground with the opposing group. Debates also touch on gender inequality in peripheral rural areas, and the importance of tradition for some in rural communities in order to retain their shared identity.

The chapter examines the impact of festivals which embody patriarchal structures on the sustainability of rural communities, particularly in terms of the within-community divisions they create. It considers this the context of post-Brexit UK, which has been, as an EU member, obliged to meet gender equality legislation as established by the EU. Gender norms and expectations change over time and the EU has been central in progressing gender equality in the Member States, particularly in “reluctant” Member States, as they were legally obliged to meet EU minimum standards. The chapter examines the UK as a Member State that has been resistant to advancing gender equality and considers debates amongst feminist scholars who argue that Brexit presents a real challenge to gender equality in the UK. It then describes the study and the results, before concluding that despite the obvious sexism embodied in the Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa, it is a complex situation that will not be resolved easily. However, post Brexit, because much European legislation no longer applies in the UK, the likelihood of achieving gender equality in Shetland has likely been diminished.

### **Gender equality in rural areas**

Disparities between the roles of men and women are, historically, much more evident in rural areas, which are often deemed “masculine spaces” (Brandth and Haugen, 2010; Dahlström, 1996). The construction of gender inequalities in rural communities is due to the traditional activities which are associated with the rural landscape, such as agriculture. This was predominantly viewed as a masculine profession, partly due to the physically demanding aspects of the job, but, mainly, because of the patrilineal transfer of land from fathers to sons which meant women “married in” to farms. Over time there has been increased recognition of the roles which women have on the farm and of women as farmers themselves (Little, 1986; Shortall *et al.*, 2017; Shortall, Budge and Adesugba, 2022). However, there is still a continuous association between rural areas and masculinity, therefore making them a “container for the operation of gender roles” (Little, 2002: 71). This can result in the broader acceptance of gender inequalities in rural areas. Additionally, it stems from the “domestic idyll”, which coincides with the rural idyll, where women were traditionally viewed in the “acceptance

order within a village”, by staying at home while men were the breadwinners of the family (Little, 1986: 3).

The European Union believes that employment and occupation are key elements in guaranteeing equal opportunities for all and that they contribute significantly towards achieving equality between men and women (UK Government, 2000). There is a complex web of legislation and hard law, combined with aspirational soft measures to try to achieve occupational equality. The EU has also introduced “soft measures” such as gender mainstreaming: checking all policies take account of gender. EU legislation on fair employment, tackling the gender pay gap, and addressing gender imbalances in occupations relates to rural as well as urban regions, with the exception of farming, which has been seen as a sector rather than an occupation (Shortall and Marangudakis, forthcoming). Rural Development programmes did have an aspiration to gender mainstream, but this was never taken seriously, and gender mainstreaming as a policy is generally considered to have failed (Fagan and Rubery, 2018).

EU institutions and scholars point to evidence of a backlash against gender equality at the EU level (Allwood, 2014; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020; Minto, Mergaert and Bustelo, 2020). Research has shown that during times of austerity and financial crises, gender equality priorities take a back seat to fiscal rectitude. In this context, the importance of EU legislation, “hard” law, has been underlined by EU experts as the Member States are often reluctant and EU legislation has been a force driving greater equality (Fagan and Rubery, 2018; Jacquot, 2017).

The UK has never had a strong commitment to gender equality and has constrained the EU’s ability to develop gender equality by objecting to and vetoing directives. For example, the EU’s attempts to legislate for gender equality on corporate boards, seen as a key barrier to women’s equal position in the labour market, were diluted because of UK opposition (Guerrina and Masselot, 2018). It is predicted that EU gender equality legislation will improve post-Brexit, while equality measures will deteriorate in the UK without the requirement to adhere to EU minimum standards. This has real implications for traditional rural societies such as Shetland, where gender roles are more traditional, and impetus is needed to bring about longer-lasting change.

This change and progression towards gender equality are key to ensure the sustainability of the population. For instance, in rural Scandinavia, the out-migration of women is strongly associated with traditional gender norms and the focus of the masculine activities in the countryside (Bye, 2009; Grimsrud, 2011). Depopulation in the Scottish Islands is such a concern of the Scottish government, that “Island Bonds” have been proposed, where young people receive up to £50,000 in order to remain or resettle in some of the most remote islands in Scotland, including Shetland’s outer islands (Scottish Government, 2021). This highlights the very real precarity of the sustainability of the island communities.

Community is a key aspect of rural identity, again, strongly associated with the rural idyll, a romanticised perspective of the countryside, following connotations of a healthy, basic yet fulfilling lifestyle (see Castree, Kitchin and Rogers, 2013;

Commins, 2004; McAreavey, this volume). This is a strongly criticised concept, which has been blamed for hiding poverty, inequalities, under-employment and gender inequalities (Bock and Shortall, 2017; McAreavey, this volume; Shucksmith, 2018). The sense of community at the centre of the rural idyll is often a myth. Tensions exist, especially for those in rural Scotland, where the reduction of services poses a threat to the communities, such as the loss of post offices and schools. This furthers the risk of depopulation. Therefore existing rural communities work to engage with their residents to ensure they do not lose a sense of cohesion. One way this can be achieved is through co-ordinated events, organised and carried out by local members (Finkel, 2010; Jaeger and Mykletun, 2013). An example of such an event is a community-run festival, such as Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa.

### **Festivals and Lerwick's Up-Helly-Aa**

Festivals undoubtedly require an extensive amount of work and organisation, Jaeger and Mykletun (2013: 215) discuss the effect that festivals have on identity and more specifically; on those who participate:

festivals can contribute to the development of identities through storytelling, explaining who we are through the concerns and other events, and through the media.

Regarding festivals in small areas, Jaeger and Mykletun (2013) highlight that there is an increased sense of community and that the “festival patronage” may be stronger in a smaller populated community. This would, therefore, highlight the effect and passion for a festival on a sparsely populated island like Shetland.

The Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa festival is one that many of those residing on Shetland would consider part of the local culture – a large social event and gathering in the annual calendar. The decision to postpone the festival for a second year due to COVID-19 is estimated to have cost the sector half a million pounds (Good Evening Shetland, 2021). It provides an important source of income for the tourism industry in the islands during the winter months (Bennett, 2018). However, the expansion of Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa has created problems as an ever-increasing number of individuals want to participate in the procession and squads in Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa. The modern-day celebration has grown to such an extent that it now hosts almost 1,000 guizers, who make up the 47 squads (Up-Helly-Aa Committee, 2019a, 2019b), and claims to be one of the largest fire festivals in Europe (Brown, 1998; Finkle, 2010). The capacity of the procession has now come to a saturation point, due to health and safety considerations (Murrie, 2018). This has resulted in the creation of waiting lists for both new members and squads, as the current squads are all full, and the committee has ruled there cannot be any more additional new squads. This is where gender issues come into play, as when Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa was created, the traditional roles were that of an active, leading male role and women played the supporting part. As the festival has evolved and become

saturated, the question of having more (female) squads to increase gender equality poses a practical difficulty for the organisers, regardless of ideological objections.

A debate has emerged about the gendered nature of the festival, with Smith (1993) commenting that it was “never a women’s festival”. It was recorded in 1902 that a group of women who tried to join the procession were promptly spoken to by the committee, and since then there have been no women in any squad. In the view of activist groups, from a legal perspective, factors such as a council’s legal obligation to follow the Equality Act 2010 are not upheld (Shetland News, 2019a, 2019b). Furthermore, the notion of what constitutes a “tradition” is questioned. Interestingly, Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa is one of the only Up-Helly-Aa festivals in Shetland which continues to exclude women completely. Others have some women in squads, and the South Mainland Up-Helly-Aa had the first-ever woman Jarl, Lesley Simpson, in 2015 (BBC, 2015). The debate has attracted local and national media attention, with opinions divided. The nature of this emotive debate has caused some to feel their opinions are not heard. Others feel they cannot express their opinions in a public space, for fear of both being ridiculed and ostracised for rejecting the cultural norm (Marter, 2019a).

## **The study**

The Shetland Islands has a small population of 23,080, and is a close-knit community (Shetland Islands Council, 2017). Therefore, when devising the methodology, a high level of confidentiality and anonymity was required. This was to ensure those in the small community felt at ease expressing their opinions in the safety that they could not be identified by the wider community in the write-up. Information was gathered in three ways; an ethnographic review, online survey and one-to-one semi-structured interviews.

Due to Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa being a one-day festival, a micro-ethnographic review was conducted, as it was not possible to complete a traditional long-term immersion in the community (Bryman, 2004). The review itself was carried out throughout the day, with observations written using a notebook. This was done at the morning civic reception, at the evening procession and at the hall at night. The following days were spent writing up these notes into a more coherent body of text, which was then subsequently analysed and utilised as data for this chapter.

The key purpose of the online survey was to generate statistical data, complimenting the qualitative aspect of both the interviews and the ethnographic review (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994). Furthermore, it provided additional anonymity for those who wanted to express their viewpoint on this issue, including the researcher, who is a Shetland native. This is especially important in a rural setting with a small population, as was eloquently expressed by an interviewee: “well you are never really anonymous in Shetland”. This demonstrates the key advantage of offering an online, anonymous survey to ensure that a holistic, representative viewpoint was captured regarding the debate. The survey was completed by those who either lived or had lived on Shetland, ensuring that it was kept to the local opinion only.

The online questionnaire consisted of 13 questions, all multi-choice with some dichotomous answers. This survey was created using Google forms software and was published on the social media platform Facebook. The post allowed other users to share the survey in order to reach a larger audience, and to not limit the potential responses to the researcher's personal Facebook "friends". Within the first 24 hours of the post being live, there were over 200 individuals who had completed the survey, highlighting the topical nature of the project and the gender debate associated with Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa. This was further demonstrated when the survey was closed, ten days after it was first made available, a total of 458 people had taken part, surpassing the initial expectations. The raw number of participants demonstrates the ongoing interest in the issue, both from those who currently live in Shetland or who have previously lived on the island.

The final section of the research methodology comprised semi-structured interviews. The script was guided by the results of the survey, for instance, the inclusion of a question regarding the potential damage to Shetland's more global reputation due to articles written in newspapers and online, criticising the festival for its exclusion of women. Additionally, the results indicated that, although it was mostly women who took part in the survey, the majority thought that women should not be allowed in squads. Therefore, a further question was added, which explored what the interview participants thought was the reason why women themselves believed that women should not be allowed in the Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa squads. This highlights the value of using a survey to inform the subsequent interview questions.

The recruitment for the interviews was done via a message at the end of the online survey which stated that volunteers were needed for interviews. If the survey participant was interested in taking part, they were asked to contact the researcher at the given email address. This was an effective method as several volunteers came forward. At the end of each interview, the researcher asked if the interviewee wanted to recommend any of their friends to be interviewed. This created a snowball effect sampling technique (Bryman, 2004). In total, ten individuals were interviewed, two men and eight women.

Although this is not an equal gender split, it highlights the wider issue of recruitment for projects which tackle a controversial issue in a rural area. Thus, the snowball effect was appropriate, as reassurance could be made that the highest level of confidentiality would be upheld. However, this did result in a sample of participants of similar ages, with the majority being in the 46–60 category, as those who took part recommended their peers. Therefore, a consideration for future research would be to try to recruit participants that are more reflective of a broader age range and are more gender equal.

## **Findings**

The focal question of the online survey revealed that the majority of the participants believed that women should not be allowed in Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa squads,

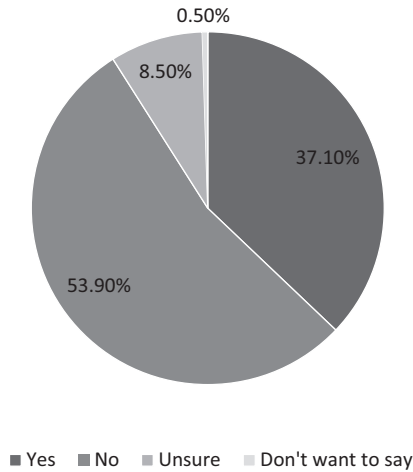


Figure 10.1 Results from survey question 12. Do you think women should be allowed in the Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa squads?

with 53.9 percent answering “No” to the question *Do you think women should be allowed to be in the Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa squads?* and only 37.1 percent answering “Yes” (Figure 10.1).

These results suggest there is a limited drive for change and reflect satisfaction with how the festival is currently structured. Interestingly, 53 percent of those who identified as female, agreed with the majority. The reason behind this finding was discussed during the interviews. Themes that were identified included identity and tradition. A sense of community is undoubtedly seen as a strength of rural areas and settlements, with it sometimes playing a key role in the survival of a rural community. Jaeger and Mykletun (2013) highlight that there is an increased sense of community and that the “festival patronage” may be stronger in areas with smaller populations. The community cohesion which Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa creates was evident throughout the interview process, with one interviewee describing the festival as:

a sense of community and also a sense of working together and everybody supporting each other, and I think that Up-Helly-Aa is a coming together of a community.

While there have been reports of the loss of community spirit in rural areas for well over a decade (Kelly, 2006), this festival brings together people who would not normally mix. Those who are in squads transcend the traditional “class divide”. One could find a high-up council official in the same squad as a labourer (Brown, 1998). This bringing together of individuals creates a sense of shared identity



and belonging to the local community (Macionis and Plummer, 2012) and could therefore be the reason for the opposition to change, as the festival is seen to be key to keeping the community together. Therefore, those who advocate for change are sometimes viewed as trying to ultimately create a detrimental impact upon the local community, essentially going against most of the local opinion. This was highlighted by an interviewee:

I think that Shetland's community is about pulling together, and I think [what] they are doing is kind of knocking against that sense of community.

The rejection of change due to the fear of upsetting the current community spirit in Shetland, and more specifically Lerwick, seems a plausible reason why many are opposed to a more gender-equal festival.

However, some argue that this community cohesion essentially excludes a large proportion of the population, particularly women. Johnson (2019: 471) argues that Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa

reinforces a gendered division of labour, harbours misogynistic or at least sexist attitudes, and limits opportunities and representation of women and girls in Shetland.

The impact of Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa on young girls is an issue felt passionately by those who support change. The harmful impact it can have was demonstrated by an interviewee:

excluding women and girls from participating fully-and being seen to participate fully-helps to embed the harmful perception that women and girls have a lesser status than men. There are many negative repercussions from such a perception.

This can include the harmful message, which is sent to boys, of their higher standing in the community. Although traditional class divides are broken down, an alternative hierarchy was evident throughout the Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa day, with the Jarl and the committee wielding the most power, symbolised with the handing over of Lerwick to the Jarl by the Convener of Shetland Islands Council. This creates a power imbalance between men and women but it also leads to inappropriate behaviour, with accounts of sexual violence occurring on Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa night. Several of the interviewees recounted anecdotal stories which they had heard, including a girl's experience of trying to report an incident of sexual harassment:

we are having girls coming forward and saying that they are reporting assaults and harassment, to the hostesses, and they are saying well no, if they can't pull your knickers down on Up-Helly-Aa, just one night a year...and to shut

up and just leave it. And actually the police ignored her, and it was only the police from south...that actually listened to her and took her home, because she had been assaulted.

The main festival also impacts on the Junior Up-Helly-Aa, a festival that mirrors the adult festival and involves boys aged 10 to 14 across Shetland. Previously, it was only boys from Lerwick who were allowed to take part, however, due to a lack of interest, it was opened to all boys in Shetland in 2019 (Munro, 2019). Girls of the same age are not allowed to participate in the procession or be elected Jarl, a matter that was clearly reinforced when in 2018, a group of four girls had their application to be part of Junior Up-Helly-Aa rejected by the adult men-run committee (Johnson, 2019). Effectively “on the eve of puberty, Up-Helly-Aa becomes gendered” (Brown, 1998: 26). For some, this is a more pressing issue than the adult version:

I feel more strongly about (about) the junior Up-Helly-Aa...because you ken (know) for adults they can kind of decide what they are doing but wee bairns (children), it's organised by adults for bairns (children) and it's very much shoehorning, well boys you can do this...and lasses (girls) you can get to vote which boys have to do it but actually you have no part to play in that, and I'm not comfortable we that at all.

Sending this message to young children can have an impact on their perception of standing in the local community. It reinforces gender divisions from a young age. As noted earlier, this can influence younger people's decisions to leave or return to rural areas. An area heavily dominated by and focussed on masculine activities can result in putting off young women from moving to the area, as they feel like they are not supported or are given a lesser role within the local community and society hierarchy (Dahlström, 1996).

This highlights the perception that Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa is detrimental to women and girls who do want to take part in the festivities. The negative perception is acknowledged by the survey participants, as shown in Figure 10.2, where 75 percent of respondents thought that the media attention given to the debate reflected either “negatively” or “very negatively” on Shetland's image.

This can be detrimental for those who may be considering a move to Shetland. One interviewee commented that if they had seen the comments that some people leave on the articles combined with the endorsement and promotion by the Shetland community of a festival that does not allow women to take part in the main procession, it would have effectively put them off from moving to Shetland.

Absolutely would make a difference...if we saw that there was an attitude now towards people then it would definitely make me think twice before moving here.

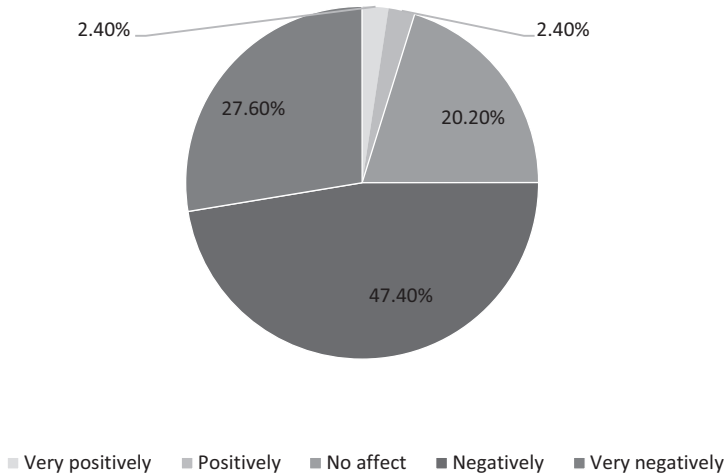


Figure 10.2 Online survey question 13, “How do you think this media attention affects the image of Shetland”.

The wider impact is critical in terms of the Shetland Islands being a sustainable rural community. Additionally, the structure and expected duties of the hall guests put one participant off for life:

women were sitting at the side of the hall waiting for a man to ask them to dance and as a guest you had to do so many hours in the kitchen... it just really put me off ever going again until they alter the, the gender participation aspect.

The ethnographic review observed how young girls would sit in the front row waiting to be chosen by a squad member for a dance, with an attendee stating that it felt like a “privilege” when selected. There was increasing discomfort among some of the participants about the festival structure and how the roles reflect and reinforce gender hierarchies in a traditional community, which impact how people perceived the birth of a baby boy or girl. One interviewee said they “became very disillusioned with it [Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa]” when they realised that the child would have no choice as to whether she will get to be a Viking, purely because of her biological sex.

One of the most serious effects of the controversy of Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa is the ever-increasing polarisation of the local community on the issue, where people are effectively split into two groups depending on their opinion on the debate, to the extent that those on either side of the issue expressed their concerns about the ability to voice opinions due to experiences of both verbal and online abuse.

One interviewee spoke about writing a letter that was published in a local news outlet:

I had folk I hardly kent (knew) messaging me saying 'don't read the comment, dunna (don't) read the comments [on the article], because there was folk writing horrendous things, like personally insulting me...I couldna (couldn't) manage to read it, I would read some of it but honestly it frightened me.

The descent into personal attacks has promoted those who have expressed their concerns in the past to being much more cautious, and in some cases, interviewees reported that the vitriol impacted their mental health.

The unwillingness to engage in an appropriate debate can be especially detrimental in a rural area such as Shetland. With a limited population, those who publicly express an opinion that is against the norm can suffer consequences that would not be so profoundly experienced in more populated urban settlements. One interviewee spoke of their fear and anxiety from negative encounters experienced when visiting public venues, such as the sports centre. There were also financial implications, demonstrated by an interviewee who owned their own business:

whenever I wrote something folk were unliking my business page...I ken (know) folk will not buy fae (from) me, they'll not engage.

The research reveals the consequences of expressing an opinion in a rural society that goes against tradition, including alienation and polarisation. The latter is evident more widely within UK society where topics including Brexit and the Scottish independence referendum created division and tensions within households (Marsh, 2016).

The polarisation of the debate reached a point that required the Chief Executive of Shetland Islands council, Maggie Sandison, to call for a cessation of the continuing abuse and negativity surrounding the debate:

It's a false dichotomy to force people to take sides; it is divisive and doesn't allow us to have problem solving conversations as a community.

(Sandison, 2019)

The involvement of the Chief Executive was however criticised and fuelled further division, mainly due to her position highlighting the positive effect of the festival for men's mental health. That position was not shared by all, as one interviewee explained:

It was very passive aggressive and it was very, umm, 'oh Up-Helly-Aa is great because it does this, this and this for men and about men's sheds and men's vulnerability and men's suicide and it just, dats (that's) a disgrace really taking

men's mental health as an argument for keeping women out of something. It appals me.

This highlights the issue of the traditional supportive role that women in rural areas are continued to expect to uphold, even if it is at the cost of their own identity and wellbeing (Little, 1986; Shortall, 2014). The council's role in Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa was highlighted to be a cause and contribution to the polarisation debate, with it providing support to the cause, as the festival costs the local authority £22,000 a year, mainly due to the isles-wide holiday the day following Up-Helly-Aa (Marter, 2019b).

The unwillingness of both sides to listen to one another's position was evident throughout the interviews. Those on either side exclaimed that no one had come forward with a proper argument, and that they would really like to understand why people held such a view. Therefore, even though there have been debates held by the Shetland Alting debating society and on Radio Shetland, there remains a lack of clarity around opposing side's key arguments (Cope, 2016). This highlights the damaging impact of the polarisation of the debate, which will become increasingly pronounced if more action is not taken to encourage appropriate debate and discussion.

Further scrutiny in 2020 of Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa came when it was revealed that as recent as 2018 the practice of black face was widely used in the squad acts (Bennett, 2020; Cope, 2020). This revelation and reaction from the local community led to each Up-Helly-Aa in Shetland, including Lerwick, swiftly condemning and issuing statements to ban the practice. The collective agreement and action against this racist practice highlights the ability of what may have been previously seen as a harmless portrayal of characters to be brought in line with modern-day standards and societal norms. The festival clearly was able to evolve rapidly alongside society's expectations, and welcome change, when it is so decided.

Very recently, in January 2022, following a one-person protest outside the town hall on the day Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa was supposed to occur – but did not due to COVID-19 – there was a statement by the committee that the possibility for women to take part in the festival would be discussed at their next meeting (Marter, 2022). In an interview on BBC Radio Shetland, a member of the committee stated that there is potential for all sides of the debate to get around the table. He highlighted what he saw as a “poisonous social media debate”, which has hampered discussions and debate. Similarly, this issue was referred to by participants on all sides of this debate throughout this research. This latest proposition appears to suggest a potential shift in thinking following two years of cancelled festivals, much publicity in both local and national media outlets, and work carried out by local campaign groups such as “Up-Helly-Aa for Aa” and “Reclaim the Raven.” However, it is yet to be determined if this shift will result in action.

## **Conclusion**

Current social norms within Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa are undoubtedly under scrutiny on an unprecedented scale. This is due to several factors, including the power

of social media and society's ever-more critical outlook on traditional gender roles. From an outside perspective, it would seem obvious that women should be involved in social structures including the Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa festival, in line with equality laws and society's wider views on gender relations. As this chapter has shown, the issue is much more complex: the festival underpins a sense of community for some and it has significant economic value for Shetland during the winter, where the tourism sector would otherwise be largely very quiet.

The festival continues to send a strong message to young girls in Shetland regarding their position in the island's society, even more so now that the Junior Up-Helly-Aa has been extended to all boys across Shetland. This level of discrimination is likely to push some girls away, resulting in them becoming disconnected from the islands. From a young age, girls are being told by adults that they are not good enough to fully participate and that they have no place in a festival that is celebrated and advertised across the community. It is reasonable to assume that the patriarchal structure could have serious consequences for the future social and economic sustainability of Shetland. It is also reasonable to assume that Brexit will slow down gender equality legislation and other measures to advance equality. All of the evidence shows that EU legislation has generally led to better gender equality in the labour market of Member States and has been particularly important in Member States less committed to equality, including the UK (Fagan and Rubery, 2018). As gender equality progresses, remote rural areas will need strong advocates for gender equality. Previously, the EU has provided this framework and imposed minimum standards on the Member States. Without this, Brexit could mean less concerted effort to address gender equality in traditional UK cultures. This could potentially threaten the viability of rural communities in Shetland.

A wider issue which has come from the Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa gender debate is that of polarisation, which is evident in this case study. This raises issues similar to those witnessed during the Brexit process and at the Scottish Independence Referendum, where tensions created divisions within households due to opposing viewpoints (Marsh, 2016). The prospect of abuse because of having a different opinion is one that creates an uncomfortable living environment, especially profound in a small rural community such as Shetland.

It is likely change will occur on the island within the next few years, especially with the latest statement from the Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa committee indicating their plans to discuss the issue of gender equality at their next meeting. However, the question is whether it is met with open arms or bitterly fought. The answer will determine the atmosphere of future festivals and the lasting potentially polarising effects will be felt throughout the islands. This will play a role in the sustainability of such festivals post Brexit, but also, and more importantly, of peripheral rural societies. What will be the new reality when the UK is no longer subject to EU gender equality legislation? Will Shetlanders continue to want to be associated with such a polarising debate, if it threatens the viability of island sustainability? The Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa festival has been described as: "in celebrating the community, it celebrates man alone" (Brown, 1998: 17). This is in danger of celebrating a fundamentally unsustainable community.

## Note

- 1 In June 2022, as this book was in final stages of publication, it was announced that the Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa festival has finally dropped its ban on women and girls taking part in the festival after longstanding pressure from equalities groups and the wider Shetland community (BBC, 2022; Carrell, 2022).

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# 11 Brexit and rural social entrepreneurship in the UK

*Artur Steiner, Kate Stephen and Sarah-Anne Munoz*

## Introduction

The European population is ageing: among European Union (EU) nations, including Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom (UK), the proportion of those aged 65 and over increased from 15.8 percent in 2001 to 19.7 percent in 2018. Due to an ageing characteristic of the EU countries, this figure is expected to grow further and reach 29.5 percent in 2050. Considering geographical issues, due to outmigration of young people who seek education and employment opportunities in cities and in-migration of retirees looking for a peaceful life in rural villages and towns, rural areas are characterised by an even higher proportion of older citizens. For instance, in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, one of the most sparsely populated areas in the EU, 22.5 percent of the local population was aged 65 and over in 2018, exceeding the UK national average by 4.3 percent (Eurostat, 2019).

In addition to the challenging socio-demographic context of Europe's ageing population, in recent years the continent has faced economic crisis, a prolonged period of economic recovery, austerity, and public spending cuts (Markantoni *et al.*, 2018), which in some ways have been more impactful in rural areas (Glass *et al.*, 2021). Small and widely dispersed populations result in high per capita costs for public service provision which, in many cases, have led to the closure of economically unviable services (Steiner and Teasdale, 2019; Steiner *et al.*, 2021a). For instance, in the last two decades, many healthcare services – particularly important to older people – have been moved to larger regional centres, leaving rural residents with no, or limited, health and care support (Farmer and Nimegeer, 2014). This and other challenges have been reinforced due to impacts of the Covid-19 global pandemic (Phillipson *et al.*, 2020).

The socio-economic and health challenges experienced internationally require an effective response to mitigate the negative consequences of specific moments of crisis. In Europe, the EU frequently acts as a body that supports collaboration between different nations to work and learn from each other, facilitate local development, and build community resilience (McAreevey, 2009). The European Commission sees the importance of “increased diversification, innovation and value added of products and services, both within and beyond the agricultural

sector ... to promote integrated and sustainable rural development” (Commission of the European Communities, 2005: 32). At a practical level, some EU funding streams, such as LEADER (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale, translated as Links between actions for the development of the rural economy) or NPP/NPA (Northern Periphery Programme/Northern Arctic Programme), aim to act as a catalyst for rural social change, entrepreneurship, and innovation (McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; Muñoz, Steiner and Farmer, 2015).

In this chapter, we use evidence deriving from our EU-funded project called Older People for Older People (O4O) to comment on Brexit and rural social entrepreneurship in the UK. O4O was active between 2007 and 2011, and aimed to harness the energy, expertise, and capacity of older people to set up community social enterprises that would address the service needs experienced by other, more vulnerable, older people. The project is of interest as it enabled socially entrepreneurial solutions to be implemented and tested in rural settings. In particular, O4O allowed the translation of existing voluntarism into more formalised participation through a social enterprise model, embedding the concept of social entrepreneurship in rural communities. Aiming to overcome some of the common challenges associated with an ageing population and diminishing rural service provision, the project engaged a number of EU partners from Scotland, Northern Ireland, Finland, Sweden and Greenland. Here, we present information deriving from the Scottish component of this action research project, although the importance of international collaboration in stimulating rural social entrepreneurship is also discussed.

We draw on the lessons learnt from O4O to discuss outcomes and benefits of conducting O4O, and potential consequences of Brexit on rural social entrepreneurship. We use the word “potential” as the full impact of Brexit will be observable over a long-term period and only truly visible in years to come. Our discussion is supported by evidence presented in relevant publications from the O4O project (see, e.g., Docking *et al.*, 2015; Farmer *et al.*, 2011; Muñoz, Steiner and Farmer, 2015; Muñoz and Steinerowski, 2012; Steinerowski *et al.*, 2011). Finally, based on our findings, in our conclusions we debate the future of rural social entrepreneurship in the UK outside the EU, and highlight implications for future rural social entrepreneurship policy and practice. We indicate that EU funding for O4O was important in facilitating rural social entrepreneurship, gathering relevant stakeholders together, and for investment in capacity building. We also show a need for creating new mechanisms that enable rural social innovation to happen and to test risky socially entrepreneurial solutions in rural settings. We express concerns that rural social enterprises can struggle to make a case for the often high costs involved in supporting relatively small numbers of people and that the fragility of sparsely populated areas might not be recognised by the UK and devolved governments. We also call for assistance in international knowledge transfer of solutions facilitating rural social entrepreneurship and an alternative approach to service provision.

## Rurality and social entrepreneurship

### *Rural context*

The geographical context of rurality offers both advantages and disadvantages to rural residents. Indeed, in addition to being close to nature, those living in rural areas can benefit from a high level of social cohesion, community embeddedness, commitment to self-help, and active civic participation (Farmer, Steinerowski and Jack, 2008). Strong mutual knowledge between rural residents frequently translates into a sense of community and high levels of trust (Steiner and Teasdale, 2019). When facing a challenge, rural communities are willing to work collectively to address issues and support each other (Kelly *et al.*, 2019). Reciprocity, collective activity, and social capital help to create dense social networks (Richter, 2019) further strengthening social support circles. However, despite the many positive attributes of rural community living, there is a need for caution in “slipping into stereotypical notions regarding the constitution of rural space” (Philo, Parr and Burns, 2003: 259). Aspects such as geographical distance, social proximity, stoic cultures and “community gossip networks” (Parr and Philo, 2003: 412) contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how individuals experience being “cared for” within rural communities. The “complex socio-spatial dynamics of inclusion and exclusion” (Parr, Philo and Burns, 2004: 401) provide a context where individuals can feel simultaneously stigmatised and cared for. The phenomenon of “otherness”, not least from rural gentrification and the impact of “incomers” in a rural community can “shed light on the wider lifestyles and experiences of diverse rural populations” (Smith and Holt, 2005: 313). Furthermore, as Bollman and Reimer (2009: 132) stated, “the existence of social networks does not always imply that these networks are used” and it is important, therefore, not to make assumptions that all rural dwelling individuals benefit from rural support and connectedness.

Importantly, rural residents are not free from socio-economic challenges, many of which are specific to the geographical context (Steiner, Calò and Shucksmith, 2021). Small and widely dispersed populations make it difficult for private and public service providers to deliver services. For instance, commercial businesses cannot take advantage of economies of scale, limiting their profitability and willingness to invest in rural locations (Steiner and Atterton, 2014). High costs of service provision and challenges associated with recruitment and/or retention of qualified staff also lead to the withdrawal of many public services. Simultaneously, globalisation, technological advancements, and changing social behaviours lead to rapid changes in rural socio-economic life. For example, on-line shopping has replaced many local businesses with so called “cost-effective” solutions. Undeniably, this austerity phenomenon combined with a reshaping nature of rural communities has meant that, in recent decades, rural villages and towns in the UK experienced the closure of many village halls, churches, pubs, schools, libraries, shops, post offices, transport facilities, as well as health and care centres (Steiner and Teasdale, 2019). Limited educational and employment opportunities lead to outmigration of young people and concentrations of older people (Christmann,

2016; O'Shaughnessy, Casey and Enright, 2011). It is likely that Brexit will have further negative impacts on rural communities due to a lack of working-age immigrants settling in, working, and delivering services in villages and rural towns. A combination of limited or non-existent services together with an influx of older residents, an ageing local population, and a decreased number of working-age people moving into rural areas can create a perfect storm, with older people lacking essential services, healthcare in particular. The latter became the focus of our O4O work in which we tested the concept of social entrepreneurship in rural settings.

### ***Rural social entrepreneurship***

Social entrepreneurship can be understood as the process of developing social enterprise, with some studies focusing on individuals or collectives as social entrepreneurs (Steiner, Farmer and Bosworth, 2019). A broader view of social entrepreneurship defines it as an enterprise activity with social goals, generating profit for re-investment in the social venture (Mair and Marti, 2006). In other words, social entrepreneurship is about exploiting entrepreneurial opportunities for social change, social innovation, and improvement (Weerawardena and Mort, 2021), rather than personal profit maximisation (Nicholls, 2010). In the same way that Kirzner (1997) argues that entrepreneurship is a mechanism through which temporal and spatial inefficiencies in an economy are discovered and mitigated, social entrepreneurship could be understood as a process that recognises social inequalities and imperfections and addresses them in an entrepreneurial way (Steiner, Calò and Shucksmith, 2021). Importantly, engagement in social entrepreneurship frequently leads to the creation of social or community enterprises – organisations with primarily social objectives that use trading to tackle social and economic challenges (Farmer, Steinerowski and Jack, 2008).

Due to its characteristics and potential positive impacts on society, in many countries around the globe, policymakers attempt to foster social entrepreneurship in order to increase the self-reliance and sustainability of their communities (Vanderhoven *et al.*, 2020). Social entrepreneurship is promoted as an important feature of post-welfare responses to un/under-employment, low skills, individual and place-based disadvantage, and as a way to increase community capacity (Markantoni *et al.*, 2018) and even address public health and wellbeing challenges (Henderson *et al.*, 2020). This is premised on the proposed benefits arising from encouraging citizens to take responsibility for providing needed goods and services (Kelly *et al.*, 2019). As such, policy documents suggest that social entrepreneurship can lead to positive place-based transformations (Steiner and Teasdale, 2019), and the encouragement is targeted at individuals and communities to co-produce or run services that traditionally were provided by the state (Steiner *et al.*, 2021a). However, despite a well-developed social enterprise policy landscape and a support network stimulating social entrepreneurship in the UK (Mazzei and Steiner, 2021), little attention is paid to *rural* social enterprise and *rural* social entrepreneurship. For instance, while a third of all Scottish social enterprises are

located in rural areas, and the Social Enterprise Strategy 2016–2026 for Scotland states that social enterprises contribute to place and regional cohesion through establishing viable businesses where markets are underserved and local economies are small and fragile (Scottish Government, 2016), little social enterprise support is offered specifically in rural areas. This is surprising as there are suggestions indicating that rural citizens are more socially-oriented in their entrepreneurship than those living in urban locations and, therefore, more likely to engage in social entrepreneurship (Williams, 2007). Considering the importance of context (Steinerowski and Steienrowska-Streb, 2012) and the rural location of our O4O project, we build upon project findings presented in our other papers (Docking *et al.*, 2015; Farmer *et al.*, 2011; Muñoz *et al.*, 2011; Muñoz, Steiner and Farmer, 2015; Muñoz and Steinerowski, 2012; Steinerowski *et al.*, 2011) and comment on the potential impact of Brexit on rural social entrepreneurship in the UK.

### ***Rural policies and social entrepreneurship***

For many years, the UK benefited from being part of the EU, its policies, interventions, and investments. Affecting over 50 percent of the EU population and approximately 90 percent of EU land, rural development has been an important EU policy area. Considering its importance, rural development is part of the common agricultural policy (CAP) aimed at strengthening the social, environmental, and economic sustainability of rural areas. The CAP's contribution to the EU's rural development objectives is supported by the European agricultural fund for rural development (EAFRD). Investments in this policy domain are substantial. For example, the EAFRD budget for 2021–2027 amounts to €95.5 billion – a fund that UK rural communities can no longer access (European Commission, 2021a).

EAFRD promotes economic and social development in rural areas through, for example, co-financing LEADER programmes. LEADER is a local development method which has been used for 30 years to engage local actors in the design and delivery of strategies, decision-making, and resource allocation for the development of their rural areas. LEADER enables local actors, including public, private, and civil-society stakeholders, to develop an area by using its endogenous development potential. The LEADER approach aims to enlist the energy and resources of people and bodies that can contribute to the rural development process by giving both development strategy design and funding powers to the local level, decentralising power and facilitating community development. Importantly, the quest for innovation has been one of the most ground-breaking and important parts of the LEADER approach. Seeking out and fostering new and innovative solutions to local problems or taking advantage of existing resources has been a core part of LEADER. Here, innovation applies to what and how things are done, the types of activity supported, and the products or services developed. It is worth highlighting that EU policy recognises that not every innovation will succeed and a permissible level of risk is allowed when investments are made. By creating the right conditions and carefully cultivating new and fresh ideas, it is hoped that substantial and sustained changes and benefits will be brought to rural

communities (European Commission, 2021a). The latter enables experimentation with socially entrepreneurial ideas and implementation of projects that, although risky, can introduce social innovation.

Indeed, the European Commission's objective is to encourage market uptake of socially innovative solutions, and social innovation cuts across a range of the EU policy areas (for more information see European Commission, 2021b). Some commentators see these moves as reflecting a new approach to social policy-making whereby top-down, centralised, and bureaucratic welfare states are being phased out in favour of models that promote greater citizen involvement in designing solutions to seemingly intractable social problems (Steiner *et al.*, 2021b) – a concept that is closely related to social entrepreneurship. Here, it is worth noting that the O4O project described in this chapter received recognition from the European contest “RegioStars Awards” for supporting social innovators. More precisely, O4O received an award in the category of “Inclusive Growth: Strategies, initiatives or projects addressing the challenge of demographic change and supporting active ageing”. Considering this recognition and the fact that the project supported an innovative (at the time of conducting our work) concept of rural social entrepreneurship in rural service provision, we use O4O as an example of rural social entrepreneurship induced by the EU.

## **Methodological underpinnings**

### ***Older People for Older People project***

Funded by the European Union, the O4O – Older People for Older People – project was conducted in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Finland, Sweden, and Greenland. O4O aimed to investigate whether and how it is possible to harness the energies of older people (defined as those aged 55 and over) in the development of community social enterprises that would provide older people's services. Project partners were united by common challenges associated with an ageing population and diminishing rural service provision. The notion of international collaborative work was used as a mechanism through which to discuss shared challenges and identify potential socially entrepreneurial solutions. At the time of our study, practical implementation of the social entrepreneurship concept was still very rare in the northern part of Europe. As such, the EU-funding supporting O4O offered a unique opportunity to test social entrepreneurship as a way of delivering rural services.

In this chapter, we focus on the O4O project component located within the remote and rural Highland region of Scotland. The area has a population of approximately 235,000, covers 25,656 square kilometers and, at the time of Britain's EU membership, was one of the most sparsely populated areas of the European Union. Economically, the region comprises a significant proportion of small and medium enterprises, with a dominance of micro businesses. Tourism and the public sector are the main employers whilst the primary sector is the largest by number of enterprises. More recently, the region started diversifying its



economic profile with a growing number of businesses being involved in energy, life sciences, food and drink, and creative industries. Interestingly, however, in the Brexit transition period, the Highlands and Islands 2019–2022 Strategy indicated that region's core industries – tourism, food and drink, as well as health and social care sectors – are particularly dependent on migrant workers, and labour availability and retention are becoming an increasing concern due to limited opportunities to attract labour and skills from EU countries (Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2019).

Importantly, the number of older people in the area is rapidly growing; for example, between 1998 and 2018 the number of those aged 75 and over increased by 57.4 percent (Highland Council, 2018). This limits the proportion of the working age population and increases demand on public services. Simultaneously, during the same period, a number of public services – including health and care – were centralised as part of a policy movement aimed at increasing efficiency, limiting health and care service options, particularly in remote and rural places. In a peculiar way, these unfavourable circumstances created fertile ground to test our project ideas and harness the energy of older people to set up and run community social enterprises to fill in gaps in health and care service provision through social entrepreneurship.

### Methods

To implement and monitor impacts of the O4O project in Scotland, we used a mixed-method research approach that consisted of:

- *Participatory action research* – this process required O4O project managers to liaise with rural citizens as well as relevant stakeholders to identify local challenges and available resources, and to take feasible ideas forward. Although supported and guided by O4O project managers, O4O community members were actively involved in learning about social entrepreneurship and, thereafter, setting up and running O4O social enterprises. Working with, and for, local citizens ensured embeddedness in local settings which, in turn, developed trust between local community members and project managers. The latter offered an ethnographic experience in a continuous process of interaction with project participants as well as reflection on processes associated with establishing community social enterprises.
- *Qualitative data collection* – to identify what happened, why, with who, and with what impact(s), the O4O research team conducted qualitative face-to-face, in-depth interviews with project participants. In-depth interviews were carried out with 27 older people in the Highlands in order to understand the impacts of their involvement in O4O-type social enterprise development. Interviews with O4O project managers were carried out in order to identify the skills and resources required to develop O4O social enterprises.
- *Quantitative data collection* – a questionnaire sent by post from each community general practitioners' (GP) surgery to all registered patients aged 55 and

over ( $n=2,462$ ; response rate 58 percent). The questionnaire included health and wellbeing-related questions originating from the SF12, the social capital module of the UK General Household Survey, and other specific questions for O4O (for more information, see Farmer *et al.*, 2011; Steinerowski *et al.*, 2011).

In this chapter, we undertake a reflexive thematic review based on the paradigm of interpretivism to better understand the experiences of participants (Bourdieu, 2003), to understand our own interpretations, and how these have changed as a result of Brexit (Byrne, 2021). We write about the project “beyond the simple description of the themes” (Campbell *et al.*, 2021); instead conducting “reflective and thoughtful engagement” with the data and analytical process (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 594). Rather than referring to specific findings deriving from the activity reports, interviews, or questionnaire<sup>1</sup>, we identify O4O outcomes, and summarise key lessons learnt. We do that from “a big picture perspective”, ten years after finishing the project, and at the beginning of a new journey for the UK outside the European Union. We argue that the time since we completed O4O helped us to develop an understanding of the project impact beyond the project lifetime; for instance, we are able to comment on issues associated with sustainability of the O4O social enterprises. Moreover, we recognise that the relationship between the UK and the EU has a long history which should be recognised when discussing the impacts of Brexit. Considering presented remarks, in the next section we reflect on benefits that O4O brought to participating communities from our perspective. We then use this reflection to discuss potential consequences of Brexit on rural social entrepreneurship.

### ***Benefits of the O4O project and rural social entrepreneurship***

The O4O participatory action research project generated positive impacts for older people living in some of Europe’s most remote and rural areas. Here, we cluster identified benefits into specific themes while emphasising the interconnectivity between them.

#### *Enhanced connectivity*

Communities involved in the O4O project were not only geographically isolated as a result of their rurality but also in their positioning in the Northern Periphery of Europe. Even urban centres of these peripheral regions can experience the “penalty of remoteness” (Diebolt and Hippe, 2018). This is further compounded by challenges associated with dispersed populations, geographical complexities, ageing populations, and variations in transport networks and information communication technology infrastructure (Roberts *et al.*, 2010). These aspects have a negative impact on human capital (Diebolt and Hippe, 2018), which impacts rural social entrepreneurship. For instance, a lack of connectivity and insufficient human resources can limit opportunities for integrated community action,

especially in relation to a form of service provision that is associated with a long-term commitment rather than one-off input from relevant stakeholders.

The O4O project connected participating dispersed, peripheral communities at two different levels including (i) citizens within local communities as well as (ii) wider international communities. As such, O4O provided a framework that acknowledged common challenges and helped to identify potential solutions to those challenges. As Borz, Brandenburg and Mendez (2018) found in their citizen survey, EU cohesion can help to develop a change in perspective from a sole identification with the peripheral region and home country to a wider awareness of the common experiences and shared identities with other peripheral regions in the EU. This observation applied to the O4O communities that, in addition to becoming united at a local level with individuals working collaboratively to run their local community enterprises, created international connections that facilitated joint learning as well as the exchange of ideas and experiences related to running social ventures.

It should be noted, however, that this cohesiveness and shared understanding neither represented nor promoted homogeneity amongst these communities. Each participating community was unique and distinct, including specific characteristics within and between countries. Individual characteristics of participating rural communities were presented as part of the O4O project, and shared and celebrated by project officers through, for example, the use of photographs of scenery and citizens. As such, communities could draw on each other's experience whilst maintaining their autonomy. Consequently, individual community factors, community connectedness, and the proportion of older people had an impact on the development of local community social enterprises (Menec *et al.*, 2015).

#### *Enabling rural social entrepreneurship and viability of socially entrepreneurial ventures*

As already indicated, rurality and remoteness, and an associated sense of isolation, can serve to force “people to come together to advocate for themselves, their community, and its most marginalized citizens” (McCrillis, Skinner and Colibaba, 2021: 4). In the case of the O4O project, we have seen evidence of individuals from participating communities harnessing an opportunity for collective advocacy for the needs of older people in rural communities. Funding from the NPP EU Programme enabled the introduction and facilitation of rural social entrepreneurship that drew on knowledge exchange between partners but also on the development of a shared sense of “rural identity”. Through participating in the O4O project, O4O communities recognised their shared “social and geographic connectedness” – a factor that contributes to the successful implementation and sustainability of “age-friendly” community developments, including, in our case, rural social enterprises (McCrillis, Skinner and Colibaba, 2021: 7). Moreover, the project helped to identify the types of support that older people, and rural communities more widely, may need in order to develop their own service delivery organisations.

Funding provided by the EU was used to bring together relevant stakeholders to educate community members on how to run socially entrepreneurial ventures. The funding covered the cost of O4O project managers whose work was vital in building community capacity, resolving challenges associated with setting up a social enterprise, and negotiating, frequently complex, community relationships. O4O project managers acted as facilitators of socially entrepreneurial action and enabled a number of relevant actors including, for example, social enterprise support experts, employees from local authorities, and health and care service organisations, to come together and contribute to the project. Clearly, the cohesion that resulted from participation in the O4O project – bringing together citizens, project managers and a variety of stakeholders – contributed to the successful implementation and subsequently enhanced sustainability of the social enterprises developed. Consequently, in many cases, the work of project managers was perceived as providing a “learning curve” to local communities who, in the early stages of developing their community enterprises, needed guidance and support. Certainly, a number of services created during the project lifetime developed further without O4O support providing services to local rural residents (Wyper, Whittam and de Ruyter, 2016).

#### *New rural services*

The project underpinned the development of several older people’s services. In one community, there was an asset transfer from the local authority to a community social enterprise. The asset, a care centre for older people, had been threatened with closure for a number of years and a community-run service was the most feasible option to maintain existing services. Post-project, the community has continued to manage the building and deliver services for a range of people in the community, including older people. In addition, the community has established a community transport service, which offers a door-to-door service for older community residents to attend the centre. These services help older people in the area to stay in their own homes and live independently for longer. Interestingly, there is evidence of practical support from the wider community in recognition that the enterprise is a local effort, a response that was not elicited when the enterprise was managed by the local authority.

Another O4O community started out with the development of transport provision with the aim of providing door-to-door transport for local older people in sparsely populated remote areas. In the process, a more complex range of services has been developed: an informal lift-sharing scheme; a community car scheme; and demand-responsive transport which generates income. Better access to transport enabled improved access to services and social networks and, as a result, more independent lives for older people. Over the course of many years, including beyond the lifespan of the project, a range of community services expanded (Wyper, Whittam and de Ruyter, 2016). For instance, taking advantage of community asset transfer, the community enterprise adopted a community model care centre, similar to the previously mentioned O4O community. It is evident

that the success in one area gave people the confidence to incorporate and provide other community services.

Finally, in one rural location, O4O supported community members in developing and implementing a local heritage project. The project led to an enhanced community sense of place, identity, and confidence as well as the establishment of a new social enterprise company to run a village hall and business with the aim of generating income to support services in the village. Consequently, the services developed varied in format and spanned local history, resources, and the needs of local people. Indeed, identifying community needs and available resources to tackle these needs is associated with social bricolage and social value creation (Di Domenico, Haugh and Tracey, 2010) through social enterprise activities that we observed in O4O.

### *Health and wellbeing benefits*

Benefits of the O4O project and rural social entrepreneurship went beyond securing existing or creating new services in the villages. In particular, we evidenced health and wellbeing benefits experienced at an individual as well as wider community level. O4O community members indicated that participation is “good for their community” making their localities better places to live. There appeared to be an acknowledgement that participation in community activities is good for their own and others’ health – this through remaining active and being connected. Positive impacts of community interactions initiated through rural social enterprises have been described in other studies (Kelly *et al.*, 2019). Also, community-run services continue to support those who are more vulnerable and in need, having a direct impact on their lives and ability to remain independent.

However, some of the individuals who took on leadership roles experienced additional stress that they would identify as being detrimental to their wellbeing. Much of the responsibility they held in a voluntary capacity was previously held by a local authority officer in a paid role, with management support. These tensions associated with running social enterprises are not uncommon and have been echoed in other studies describing social entrepreneurship (Millar *et al.*, 2020).

### *Decreased dependence on the state*

Engagement of older people in O4O led to the creation of O4O community social enterprises supporting other, frequently more fragile, older citizens. Indeed, evidence from our project suggests that O4O services provide services that help to support the independent living of older people, reducing, as a consequence, dependence on the state as a provider. In addition, involvement in O4O social enterprises enhanced connectivity (see our earlier section), helped to create trust, and develop social networks. The latter led to increased community capacity and community resilience and, consequently, less reliance on the state. Participation in the O4O also helped older people to keep active for longer, bringing a positive

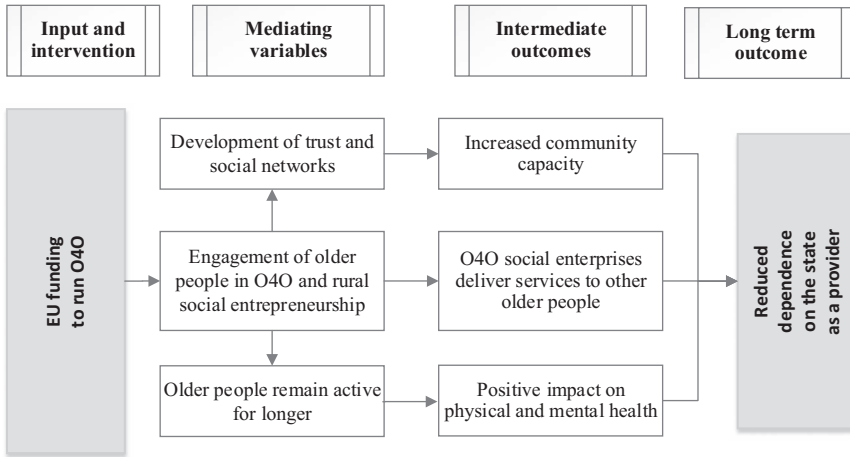


Figure 11.1 Impact of O4O on public service provision.

impact on their physical and mental health. Promoting active and healthier lives means that beneficiaries require less input from public health and care service providers. Thus, through rural social entrepreneurship, O4O contributed to creating communities that are less dependent on public service providers (Figure 11.1).

In addition to reduced dependence on the state (Figure 11.1), local projects generated employment opportunities for local people. The latter can be particularly important when the retention of working-age people is low due to a lack of local jobs and high unemployment levels. Consequently, we observed that the project generated added value associated with indirect impacts. In fact, both direct and indirect impacts of the O4O project need to be considered in informing our discussion about the potential consequences of Brexit on rural social entrepreneurship.

### *Changing perception of older people*

The project helped to shift perceptions of older people as a burden on society and towards recognition of the value they can bring to their communities as well as their potential to be involved in service design and delivery. Whilst it is inarguably true that a proportion of older people require and depend on public and community services, the project promoted older people as assets of rural communities, challenging stereotypes about older people being purely “in need” of services. In O4O, the value of older people as volunteers was demonstrated in quantitative and qualitative data collected and in the participatory action research outcomes, with evidence of successful community development being driven by the dedication, enthusiasm, and skill of older citizens. Moreover, the contribution to changing perceptions of older people generated by O4O was noted by the European Commission, which acknowledged that the project assisted in addressing the

challenge of demographic change and supporting active aging. As a winner of the Regiostars Award, the project was praised for offering an alternative approach to the “problem” of ageing communities and, instead, promoting older people as a socially entrepreneurial asset and a key part of the solution.

In the next section, we consider the implications of Brexit in the context of rural social entrepreneurship. Then, to conclude, we highlight key messages, including implications for policy and practice deriving from the presented study.

### ***Consequences of Brexit on rural social entrepreneurship***

Using our reflections on the O4O project, we now turn to consider the potential consequences of Brexit on rural social entrepreneurship in the UK. We do this by analysing the benefits of the O4O project, assuming that those benefits would not have occurred without EU support.

#### *Engagement, support, and entrepreneurial capabilities*

O4O enabled engagement in social entrepreneurship in remote and rural areas. Our experience of the O4O process suggests that the project provided a source of external support to community members to develop skills and confidence in their own abilities and set up social enterprises. For example, we evidenced that remote and rural communities need to be able to draw on certain entrepreneurial capabilities in order to develop social enterprises (Muñoz, Steiner and Farmer, 2015). Drawing on the skills of “external experts”, O4O assisted in developing skills within communities, enabling “things to happen”. Engagement and support that acted as an essential component of instigating rural social entrepreneurship would not have happened without EU funds, which brought a variety of relevant community stakeholders together and enabled the creation of rural social enterprises. At the same time, we note that O4O represents only one example of an EU project that supported socially entrepreneurial capabilities. Indeed, the cumulative impact of hundreds or thousands of EU-funded rural projects across the UK has been significant and a lack of relevant substitutes to energise the capabilities of rural communities may lead to lost opportunities to embed socially entrepreneurial solutions in local settings as well as decreased social engagement.

#### *Funding*

O4O has shown that, within rural areas, public sector funding is particularly important in initiating community entrepreneurship. O4O was funded by the EU and this kind of support needs to continue in one form or another. Without the financial support that we received to run the project, the rural social entrepreneurship projects described in this chapter would not have been created. More importantly, the social innovation associated with inspiring communities to address their own challenges would not have taken place. Since the project finished, we have evidenced a positive “domino effect”, with neighbourhood rural

communities adapting and harnessing social entrepreneurship as a viable solution to local problems.

We also note a need for mixed-income streams. As rural social enterprises are faced with the perennial challenges of increased costs associated with sparsity and low levels of demand in areas with small populations, there is a need for income from service delivery and trading to be supplemented with grant income. The EU was, and for its members continues to be, a source of such income, targeted at sparsely populated areas, e.g., the European Structural Investment Funds (LEADER, NPP/NPA, Cohesion Fund, European Regional Development Fund, and the European Social Fund). In the UK, Brexit means that the ongoing sustainability of rural social enterprises could be challenged, unless alternative funding for sparsely populated areas is provided. So far, EU funds like LEADER or NPP/NPA, supporting socio-economic development of rural places, including aspects of *rural* social entrepreneurship and *rural* social innovation, have not been replaced by the UK governments. Existing funding streams are largely centralised and they fail to take account of the specificity of place and local needs. Frequently, the priority is placed on large-scale economic investments as well as urban development; without a doubt, since leaving the EU, UK policymakers have paid little attention to supporting *rural* social entrepreneurship, with no mechanisms being in place to support cohesion and sustainable development of rural communities. The effects of the latter are yet to be seen but, considering challenges deriving from the Covid-19 pandemic, the need to create sustainable socio-economic solutions supporting rural citizens is, arguably, greater than ever before. It is questionable, however, whether limited public funding in the UK post-Covid-19 environment will consider the financial needs of sparsely populated rural communities, favouring cheaper *per capita* investments in urban locations. A lack of ring-fenced funding for rural socio-economic development might therefore become an increasing issue affecting those residing in rural areas.

#### *Translating informal help into community entrepreneurship*

O4O enabled the translation of existing voluntarism into more formalised participation through a social enterprise model, with facilitated community meetings embedding the legitimacy of the concept of social entrepreneurship. The latter involved processes of community dialogue where the project manager and community members discussed the idea of service design and delivery. Without these opportunities for citizens to explore the concept of service co-production, services created by O4O would not exist. Importantly, as presented in Figure 11.1, these socially entrepreneurial services can reduce dependence on the state. As such, it could be argued that EU investment in rural communities provided added value benefits that go beyond the rural domain and support the activities of wider UK service provision.

Considering O4O, we evidenced that, in a remote and rural context, developing new solutions and presenting success in other communities is needed to legitimise ideas of co-design and co-production. Embedding this legitimacy within the



community is needed to catalyse the community action model which, thereafter, can be “franchised” in other rural locations. These lessons should not be forgotten but taken forward in the post-Brexit context.

#### *Limited knowledge exchange and cooperative working*

The increased sense of cohesion and collective advocacy that was facilitated by the O4O project had a positive influence on the implementation and sustainability of social enterprise development. Post-Brexit, opportunities to support these components of rural social entrepreneurship through funding from the EU are significantly limited. Without this support, there is a risk that peripheral rural communities in the UK nations and other locations at the edge of Europe will become more remote and have less of a collective voice. For instance, NPP/NPA funding is no longer available to rural communities from the UK (European Union, 2021), making it challenging for UK partners to initiate new international projects or continue existing collaborations. Importantly, rural areas need not only a replacement for these funds but also continued access to knowledge exchange and cooperative working mechanisms across European rural and remote areas. The question is whether the UK government recognises the value of these activities which, although beneficial, might be difficult to financially quantify despite increasing popularity of tools measuring social value, such as the Social Return on Investment (NEF, 2022) or Social Value Engine (RSN, 2022). Although useful, these kinds of tools might be too time-consuming or costly, and therefore impractical, when assessing impacts of rural, frequently small in scale, projects.

#### *Labour and movement of people*

Rural social enterprises in the O4O model, often in care-type services, rely on labour from outside those rural areas and often outside the UK. Indeed, challenges in recruiting a rural health and social care workforce in the UK had been identified even prior to Brexit, with individuals from the EU helping to fill the gap (De Lima and Wright, 2009). As social care workers are not exempt from the UK’s points-based immigration system, severe shortages are predicted (Holmes, 2021). For social enterprises such as those developed through the O4O project, which depend on social care workers, a sustainable future is under threat. We note, however, that the challenge goes beyond the healthcare sector. In many rural places, immigrants from the EU helped to change local demographics, bringing more working-age citizens and providing labour to local businesses, including social enterprises (De Lima and Wright, 2009). As such, current progress in revitalising UK rural locations may suffer.

#### *Recruitment and workforce management*

The O4O project focused on sustainability in the development of social enterprises. A key aspect of this was to build the capacity of management committees

and boards and to facilitate autonomy of decision-making. Recruitment and management of staff were skills and responsibilities of which many participants had no previous experience. Local people commonly criticised the decisions previously made by external agencies (such as the local authority or health board) in relation to recruitment and management, especially when external candidates were appointed to new posts and local applicants were overlooked. Interestingly, when the locus of control was more local, decisions made by local groups also favoured the most qualified candidate as opposed to the local applicant.

However, dealing with issues around workforce management can be problematic. When an employee is also a local resident and potentially a personal friend of members of a rural social enterprise management committee or board, there can be added pressure in responding to situations that involve a verbal or written warning or dismissal. Long-standing relationships can be broken as a result of the difficulty in separating professional and personal interactions in rural communities.

External support is invaluable in supporting rural social enterprises with recruitment and staff management when the scale and availability of local skills are limited. In the Scottish Highlands and Islands, this aspect of support continues to be provided through organisations such as the Highlands and Islands Social Enterprise Zone, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Social Enterprise Academy. It is essential for rural social enterprises in the UK that this type of support is provided and sustained.

### *Bureaucracy*

Despite bringing a variety of benefits, staff and participants in the O4O project commonly criticised the level of bureaucracy that was associated with EU funding. Indeed, this finding is not unique but has been found in other European Union funding streams including, for example, LEADER (Steiner, 2016). Bureaucracy as well as administratively heavy and complex funding rules acted to quash enthusiasm and reduce the confidence of social entrepreneurs who simply wanted to put their energies into developing and managing the social enterprise. We believe that it is important to stress that despite numerous negative impacts of Brexit on rural social entrepreneurship, there are opportunities for future funding provision to be less bureaucratic. If replaced, flexible, straightforward, and easy-to-use local funding streams and tailored support can add value to rural social entrepreneurship, enhancing rural citizens' ability to further develop more social enterprises and reach wider groups of community members. Importantly, there are examples of policy initiatives supporting the work of communities; for instance, in Scotland, the government encourages a democratic process in which citizens decide directly how to spend part of a public budget through so-called "Participatory Budgeting" and its Community Choices Fund (Scottish Government, 2022). Although introduced years before Brexit and not tailored to address specifics of rural communities or to support rural social entrepreneurship, these kinds of policies and funds could evolve to fill in a funding gap created by Brexit and to target the needs of rural citizens.

## Conclusions

Through reflecting on the O4O project, we have shown the importance of EU funding in facilitating rural social entrepreneurship. The funding was essential for gathering relevant stakeholders together and for investment in capacity building. Indeed, O4O has introduced social entrepreneurship in the O4O communities which, at the time of running our project, was perceived as a novel concept. The project has shown that external facilitation of rural community entrepreneurship might be essential for change to happen. O4O led to rural social innovation and assisted in legitimatising the concept of rural social entrepreneurship within rural communities and local service providers. But will new funding streams support O4O-type projects? In our case study, O4O created a movement, inspired people to co-produce services, and created skills enabling rural social entrepreneurship.

This chapter recognises the importance of policymakers in being proactive in replicating some of the EU initiatives supporting rural development. After all, Brexit was a political move and UK policy needs to adapt to the new socio-political circumstances deriving from it. For example, there is a need to create programmes with a specific focus on peripheral rural communities and for funding to support rural social entrepreneurship. However, because funding providers tend to measure impact using the number of people who have benefited from funded projects, rural social enterprises can struggle to make a case for the often high costs involved in supporting relatively small numbers of people. The EU identifies the fragility of sparsely populated areas and recognises the need for support. A cynical view of national governments is that they tend to prioritise funding to areas where impact is demonstrable and electoral success may follow. If there is no political will to replace the EU funding that was targeted at sparsely populated areas and supported rural social entrepreneurship, these areas will be more likely to decline.

Importantly, in addition to the targeted funding supporting social entrepreneurship, the benefits of being part of the EU were not purely monetary. Financial means triggered a series of events and activities that enabled rural social entrepreneurship to thrive. Being part of the EU brought community cohesion within specific regions as well as internationally, activating frequently “inactive” rural social networks (Bollman and Reimer, 2009). Individuals in sparsely populated rural communities on the periphery of Europe were able to discover commonalities and feel more connected. EU funding provided a mechanism for knowledge transfer of solutions to the challenges of an ageing, rural population and of an alternative approach to service provision. Hearing about rural social enterprises that had been established by other older Europeans helped to inspire and give confidence to the older people who participated in the project. Instead of just looking inward, the project gave a broader perspective which made some participants realise that they were not alone in the challenges they faced. Undoubtedly, learning from others is probably one of the most important aspects of the international EU collaboration from which Britain benefitted for many years.

Considering social entrepreneurship, we also note that although support for social enterprises exists, UK policy gives little attention to *rural* social enterprise. A lack of appropriate policy support to build the capacity of rural communities may lead to lost opportunities to embed socially entrepreneurial solutions in rural settings. Indeed, EU funding allowed for a level of risk to take place, enabling social innovation. Moving forward, UK policies should take a similar approach and allow elements of risk to be incorporated into public investments to facilitate rural social entrepreneurship.

In the EU and the UK, challenges associated with an ageing population will only increase, compounding the need for ongoing investment, especially in rural areas. Nonetheless, there is a need to challenge “doom and gloom” attitudes to demographic challenges and to recognise the opportunities that rural communities have to run sustainable social enterprises in which older people are part of the solution. Rural social entrepreneurship can be an efficient way to engage older people in social entrepreneurship. Without EU policy and funding, none of the O4O project outcomes would have come to fruition and many other projects in rural parts of the UK would not exist. To counteract this, we need to invest in rural social entrepreneurship to identify local resources to tackle local problems and enable the testing of potentially risky rural social innovation. It is necessary to create national funding streams that are targeted specifically at sparsely populated areas and that create opportunities for knowledge transfer about social entrepreneurship models to isolated communities. Additionally, policymakers should facilitate international collaboration beyond traditional commercial entrepreneurship and recognise the value of international social entrepreneurship – this to inspire communities with alternative service provision solutions and sustainable rural community development. In time, as evidenced in the O4O project, the latter can lead to reduced dependence on the state – an issue that is discussed by many policymakers in the face of growing financial pressures associated with socio-political challenges. To achieve this, however, investment is needed. Importantly, as communities are not keen on the bureaucracy associated with EU funding streams, we call for less bureaucratic support for rural social entrepreneurship.

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## **Note**

- 1 Specific findings of this study relating to different components of our data collection were published in other papers referenced in this chapter. For more information, please read the referenced papers.

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## 12 Ongoing challenges

For a resurgent rural in post-Brexit,  
post-Covid times

*Keith Halfacree*

### **Introduction: challenging rural times beyond the classroom...**

Having taught a final year undergraduate module on Contemporary Rural Britain at Swansea University for longer than easily recalled, the last few years have thrown up unanticipated challenges to a well-established routine that extend far beyond engaging with subtle changes in EU rural support packages, new planning initiatives or appreciating the latest leisure activity making its physical mark on our countryside. Specifically, teaching has had increasingly to engage with and bring in the emerging and potential impacts on rural Britain of both the 2016 vote in favour of the UK leaving the EU – Brexit – and the ongoing Covid-19 “apocalypse” (Eggel *et al.*, 2020). Just as with its relations to all the major impactful currents shaping UK society, my module’s “rural Britain” cannot raise a metaphorical drawbridge, keep change out and simply carry on as before. As Hoggart (1988: 36) so effectively observed half a lifetime ago: “Causal processes do not stop at one side of the urban-rural divide”.

The present book’s chapters have certainly noted and made clear something of the chore I face in keeping teaching up-to-date and engaging substantially with how the rural UK is being impacted significantly by the twin challenges of Brexit and Covid-19’s “jolt[ing] rural areas onto the centre stage” (Heron *et al.*, Chapter 1; McAreavey Chapter 2) for much of the UK public. Trying to collate some perspective on both is thus the subject of this chapter. However, from the start – again reinforced by the tone of much of the writing in the book – it must be noted that the chapter must remain far from conclusive. One key term underpins, underlines, even undermines much of what can and will be said: “uncertainty”. The future is never pre-written, even seemingly permanent statues fall, and the unfolding consequences of both Brexit and Covid-19 both emphasise this strongly for the rural UK and ultimately feed into this chapter’s ultimate conclusion.

The chapter is structured as follows. Following this introduction, it engages with some of the emerging consequences Brexit has for the rural UK, inspired explicitly by both insights from the present book’s chapters and other studies and evidence. The chapter then overlays this ultimately still uncertain but seemingly bleak picture with a tentative initial summary, culled not least from news stories – notably from the *Guardian* newspaper but other broadsheet papers or the BBC

could equally have been used – of some of the social impacts on rural areas of Covid-19. This latter tale seemingly starts more brightly than that for Brexit but soon becomes overcast again. Nonetheless, the chapter’s concluding section seeks out the positive, drawing on how both the rural’s Brexit and Covid-19 experiences need not take what I term the “revanchist rural” path but can be seen as practical elements within the utopian Good Countryside dream (Shucksmith, 2018). It is a call for the UK rural to be actively and defiantly alive today, not a withdrawn and resentful reactionary space.

### **Brexit: setting back diversity across rural space**

When just over one-third of the UK population voted for Brexit in 2016,<sup>1</sup> the potential fate of the rural UK did not attract the same immediate attention as that of Prime Minister Cameron, those seeking to travel to and from mainland Europe for holiday or work or, a bit later, the political situation of Northern Ireland within the UK. However, it has subsequently become a noted area of attention (Halfacree, 2020), not least from recognition of the imminent loss of substantial EU financial support primarily to farmers. Later, this has been joined by rural UK inflections on almost all the immediate post-Brexit headline-grabbing subjects. Brexit, in short, is now widely acknowledged as being far from peripheral “detail” for the rural UK.

However, as I write, Brexit remains very much still an emerging experience for the UK overall (cf. UK Parliament, 2022) and the assessments given below must all be recognised as being quite tentative. Recognition of this qualification has also been apparent throughout the present book, illustrated not least through many chapters outlining a range of possible futures for a post-Brexit rural UK. Such sense of a degree of openness is also reiterated elsewhere by presentations on post-Brexit futures as diverse as Little (2021), Ojo *et al.* (2021) and Rebanks (2021). The benefits of such openness will be engaged explicitly in the chapter’s conclusion but analysis now turns to the consequences of something that has been very much decided: the UK’s loss of EU agricultural support.

### **Funding and directing post-CAP futures**

It must be noted from the outset that the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), generally through its associated priorities and policies but most obviously and directly through the huge funds it has provided to farmers – over four billion Euros in 2015, 76 percent directly paid to farmers (Institute for Government, 2021) – has been a major player in the long-term and everyday shaping of the rural UK since the 1970s. Indeed, as Heron in this volume reiterates, rural governance overall in the UK – focused on later – has long been intimately tied up with the development of agriculture policy. The UK’s exit from the CAP, therefore, unless of course simply replacing it with a (near) identical domestic version, is thus of absolutely critical significance (Ojo *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, besides CAP policy and funding, we should also recognise, again with Heron (Chapter 3), how

numerous EU directives and regulations more generally have worked to determine the economic, social, environmental and cultural make-up of the UK rural and how such places have also benefitted from EU funds not specifically reserved for them. There is thus a tremendous amount at stake and to play for with the system including the amount of UK rural financial support that is to supplant all of this EU input.

The big player coming onto the field here, at least across rural England, is the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) (Institute for Government, 2021; Little *et al.*, this volume), emerging from the post-Brexit Agriculture Act's (2020) attempt to drive forward a politically heralded "once in a life-time opportunity" (Attorp and Hubbard, Chapter 5) to reshape farming support fundamentally. Through its seemingly firm prioritising of and focus on "public payments for public goods" (Chapter 5) over private enterprise (Chapter 2), ELMS is seeking to take the ongoing shift that was occurring within the CAP from Pillar 1 (direct support) to Pillar 2 (rural development) funding to a whole new level. Tied in with the government's wider EU objectives (Chapter 4), ELM optimistically heralds a "green Brexit" (Burns, 2021), even a vision of a new rural governance centred on environmental priorities as the state expands further into rural areas predominantly as a response to the global environmental crisis (Chapter 3). Furthermore, benefits here may impact not only on farming but on other areas of rural land use, notably forestry. Thus, Wynne-Jones *et al.* in this volume suggest, Brexit's end of CAP provides the forest sector with an opportunity to increase still further its growing focus on the ecosystem services that can be delivered by trees and, consequently, calls for it to seek fuller integration of trees within agricultural landscapes.

Yet, notes of caution must be noted before heralding any clear-cut bright new green dawn for the rural UK. As Heron goes on to note in Chapter 3, any true green governance for the rural UK after Brexit must disentangle fully agricultural policy from a complex web of rural governance and repair any tears made. Signs here are not so good, for example, when it is observed that the UK government has so far refused to commit to aligning environmental standards and their change over time with (rising) EU standards or even simply not to lower them through a non-regression clause (Reid, 2021). Even for ELM, some environmentalists now fear that the scheme is already losing its environmental vanguardism and becoming closer to previous less ambitious agri-environmental schemes (Chapter 4).

Moreover, if UK agriculture consequently loses its longstanding "exceptional" position within rural policy support (Chapter 2; cf. Monbiot, 2020), there are then lots of questions raised orientating around likely impacts on farm profitability and viability (Chapter 5; Ojo *et al.*, 2021). The NAO (2019) have noted that nearly half of the farms would have made a loss in recent years without receipt of direct payments. Reflecting this, farmers' unions, for example, have already expressed strong concerns about the consequences of a proposed agricultural free-trade deal with Australia undermining UK food prices (*Guardian*, 2021a) or of a longstanding "no deal Brexit" choking-off Welsh farmers' considerable reliance on food sales to the EU (Nation Cymru, 2021). As Little (2021) observed in evidence for

the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, agriculture’s “biggest change in 70 years” suggests four scenarios for farmers: intensify production to make up for loss of direct payments, which “could be detrimental to the environment”; exit the industry; “just hang on” but with possible “environmental disbenefits”, as the everyday priority has to be farm survival; or take up new ELM schemes smoothly. Of these four possibilities, the first three all raise considerable doubts about both many farming families’ continued existence and, specifically, the ability of these families to cope not just with food production but also to help counter ongoing environmental crises. The fourth possibility, a smooth and commonplace transition into ELM, is seen to require major efforts to engage practically and motivate farmers, with Little, Lyon and Tsouvalis warning in Chapter 4 that the scheme’s “harder to reach stakeholders... could represent a substantial portion of the agricultural sector in [ELM’s] codesign process”.

### ***International in-migrant labour consequences***

Whilst supposed resentment about the number of migrants coming to the UK appears to have been a major stimulus for the pro-Brexit vote (Clarke *et al.*, 2017), it should be noted how greater legal controls on such flows nationally is not just something that will impact on UK cities. Rural economies, most notably the UK agri-food sector but also more widely, are highly dependent on EU migrant labour (Harris, 2021; House of Lords, 2017; Milbourne and Coulson, 2021). For example, the UK’s second chamber of Parliament, the House of Lords (2017), noted horticulture’s 80,000 seasonal workforce, 90–98 percent coming from the EU; poultry’s 60 percent of meat staff, 50 percent of egg-packing centre staff and 40 percent egg farm personnel being migrants; and EU migrants’ prominence amongst vets and abattoir workers, with 48 percent of newly registered vets in 2016 having qualified elsewhere in the EU/EEA.

Brexit’s impact on the employment of these migrants was near instantaneous, a survey for the National Farmers’ Union for 2017 suggesting horticulture had over 4,000 (12.5 percent) unfilled labour vacancies (rising to 29 percent at harvest), not least due to a decline from 41 percent in 2016 to 29 percent in 2017 in workers returning to the UK for the harvest (*Guardian*, 2018). Whilst the press soon picked up on imagery of strawberries left to rot in the fields (*ibid.*), the situation has remained severe ever since and “unpicked berries are rotting on the bushes...there are not enough workers to pick it” (*Guardian*, 2021h). Government attempts to interest “our graduates and domestic workforce [in working in] this vibrant [agricultural] industry” (DEFRA, 2018: 10) have thus far not come to much, perhaps unsurprisingly given the physical and other challenges of work often paid only minimum wage plus bonuses (Abboud 2019). Thus, in 2022, the National Farmers’ Union (NFU, 2022: np) headlined a “perfect storm, [with] a shortage of workers bringing to a halt the UK’s just-in-time supply chains in some places”.

The loss of working-age international labour migrants to the rural UK which followed the Brexit vote is not just of concern to the agricultural community,

however (Chapter 2), as already suggested. Migrants have also been widely employed in service employment in rural places popular with tourists, such as the Scottish Highlands (*Guardian*, 2021i). Crucially, this is a major potential economic growth area for the rural UK, not least in the light of Covid's positive "re-branding" of rural areas, discussed later. Migrant workers are also important for caring for the ageing rural population, to some extent – at least demographically – countering the continued loss of young people from rural areas. With an ever-ageing rural population, the caring challenges this throws up can only increase, compounding the need for rural investment and support for areas such as the social entrepreneurship discussed by Steiner *et al.* in Chapter 11. International migrants surely have a role to play here (see Halfacree, 2008) but, even if admitted in the near future, how essential experiments in managing the ageing countryside will be supported is unclear. Thus, Steiner *et al.* demonstrate how the EU-funded Older People for Older People O4O scheme facilitated productive rural social entrepreneurship but similar such innovative support will clearly be required in the near future to catalyse further necessary innovation. Where this will come from remains very unclear.

Furthermore, even if sufficient international migrants do arrive to work in rural areas of the UK again, when – one assumes – robust international labour migrant agreements have been implemented, a greater sense of "temporariness" in their destinations than in the EU's right to reside anywhere in the community context, when long-term settlement often occurred, also has rural place consequences. A sense of transience will potentially do little either for the migrants' sense of place security (see Flynn and Kay, 2017; Guma and Jones, 2018; MacKrell and Pemberton, 2018) or their potential to form a stable part of a diverse settled new rural geography for the UK (Halfacree, 2020). As Milbourne and Coulson (2021) sharply observe, post-Brexit UK agricultural policy seems to be "normalising" further a *migrant* labour-dependent system, which gives little consideration to the often far from "idyllic" working and living experiences of the migrants, rather than seeking a more holistic and experientially benign alternative model. This concern is clearly of relevance to the ongoing challenge of making the UK countryside a socially diverse space, an issue returned to throughout this chapter. Overall, reiterating Guma and Jones's (2018: 7) conclusion drawn from the experiences of European migrants living in Wales, Brexit instead signifies "an ongoing process of "othering" and unsettling".

### **Overall rural governance issues**

If, as Heron (after Sørensen and Torfing, 2018) observes in Chapter 3, governance is primarily concerned with the "solving of problems" then – as previous sections of this chapter already attest – this is a topic meriting sustained attention by all those with an interest in promoting a comfortable future for the rural UK. Central here will be finding the "right" balance between state and non-state elements in the playing out of power. Within this, as Heron also usefully notes, the role of the state is far from negligible. It has, in fact, expanded its rural presence recently,

not least due to it having to respond to the diverse (global) environmental crises (Chapter 4). Yet, how much both the UK state plus the devolved authorities in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales – but, of course, absent for England – will focus on rural governance matters is, however, uncertain. Clearly, in the context of CAP loss, some attention has been given but emerging (as of February 2022) national political crises, such as fuel and food poverty and reanimated inflation, are perhaps understandably diverting state eyes from the rural governance ball.

One illustrative example of concern regarding future rural governance comes from Northern Ireland, developed by Cirefice *et al.* in Chapter 6 in the context of that country's present "mining bonanza". This bonanza's expanding extractive frontier has pushed particularly into the under-invested west and border areas, rural areas exhibiting strong legacies of conflict and colonialism. However, in spite of these areas' marginalised geographies, the mining bonanza has not always been welcomed with open arms or simply not been resisted (Chapter 6). Instead, in a far from "empty countryside", groups from both Northern Ireland and the Republic have worked tightly together in campaigns against these extractivist projects. This campaigning could be at least disrupted by the currently uncertain issue – resurgent once again – of Northern Ireland's governance. On the one hand, as Cirefice *et al.* note, Brexit will remove for the anti-extractivist groups the whole matter's supra-national and neutral oversight by bodies such as the European Commission and European Court of Justice, undermining a legal approach emphasising the protection of the environment that involves EU environmental directives. On the other hand, and furthermore, ongoing tensions and disputes about the status of the border between the North and the Republic, a longstanding "wicked problem" (Chapter 5) and a key governance question, could also hinder cross-border unity shown to date. This is equally true, of course, of cross-border initiatives seeking to engage with *any* negative rural challenges that are already present or subsequently arise following Brexit.

A number of chapters in the present book also suggest how the state, both the UK and devolved, will have been firmly awake to rural matters and take the baton from the EU if ongoing progressive developments are not to stall or even reverse. If Monbiot (2018) is correct, however, the UK has a collapsing "administrative state", no longer kept at least animated by the demands of EU law. Clear concern here covers everything from helping the rural UK deliver the increasingly broad demands being placed on it for recreation, protecting its environmental resources and promoting its biodiversity (Chapter 5), to progressing more specific demands, such as for the sometimes contentious community-based renewable energy developments that have in part to date been shaped through EU rhetoric (Tolnov Clausen and Rudolph, Chapter 8).

Another specific challenge for progressive rural governance is to keep taking forward the still significant challenge of tackling the urban-rural divide in broadband access (Philip and Williams, 2019) – which is still favouring the urban – without being able to make helpful recourse to EU regulations promoting and seeking to harmonise community electronic communications (Gerli and Whalley, Chapter 9). Recent press stories suggest noted challenges, such as

from imminent loss of the now-residual 3G network that nonetheless remains a critical resource in some remote rural locations (*Guardian*, 2022a). Strong rural governance clearly needs to counter powerful “market distortions” but it is at best uncertain how well this can be achieved if, in the restrained words of Gerli and Whalley in this volume, “promotion of the digital economy and society is left to the enthusiasm of domestic political parties”.

Further concern for rural diversity and inclusivity is reflected in the issue of retaining not just young people across rural areas generally but young rural women in particular. Both are necessary requirements for rural communities to remain viable in terms of “balanced” demographic and gender structures. As has already been suggested, both have also not been helped by the loss of working-age international migrants arriving in the rural UK. The gender-balance challenge is well observed through Budge and Shortall’s dissection of the ingrained patriarchy underpinning Shetland’s otherwise celebrated Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa festival in Chapter 10. The authors fear that efforts to make this festival more gender inclusive, challenging deeply historically engrained gender roles, will not be helped by UK withdrawal from the oversight of strengthening EU legislation and consequent potential dropping of “bureaucratic” requirements to adhere to the EU’s minimum gender equality standards. On the ground, strong equality advocates, required generally across remote rural areas, in particular, need high profile, clearly justified and suitably resourced positions to bring about positive change. This is a situation most uncertain to be sufficiently filled, certainly in the immediate post-EU context, without closer attention being paid to the whole state / non-state mix and the working of 21st-century rural governance.

### ***Post-Brexit rural revanchism***

All of the consequences from Brexit for the rural UK noted above – still emerging, mostly still quite uncertain, and with some possibly having been missed – can be brought together to consolidate this section under one theme. This key overarching theme is of how some degree of an initial promise of and certainly a suggested potential for increased diversity in jobs, people and experiences across rural UK – a countryside freed from the “shackles of Brussels” (if one runs with the pro-Brexit language) – is actually being significantly set-back practically by the playing-out of the UK’s going-it-alone political stance. Put slightly differently, any momentum towards a more diverse UK countryside that would foreground and celebrate many of the rural UK’s now long recognised and generally celebrated “neglected rural geographies” (Philo, 1992), for example, is at the very least likely to be slowing and will require substantial work from all interested bodies to get it back up and running. Instead, a version of the seemingly still ubiquitous “rural idyll” (Bunce, 2003; Halfacree, 2015; Yarwood, 2005), with its “power-infused discourse of an imagined golden age of indeterminate date” (Shucksmith, 2018: 171), appears as if it is being resurrected once again, with all of its experiential selectivity notably to the fore.

An overall sense of the challenge ahead for advocates of any richly diverse UK countryside face with the reanimation of the idyllic (*sic.*) rural can be glimpsed through observations of the debate on the desired future for the UK that built up to the 2016 Brexit referendum. Within this often torrid and bitter debate, “the British countryside” as a socio-spatial imagination or representation (Halfacree, 1993) renewed itself, sometimes more implicitly than explicitly, as some kind of post-Brexit UK “ideal”, a strongly conservative or even reactionary goal for a re-born “post-European” UK (Halfacree, 2020). As Calhoun (2016: 56) acutely observed, on the day of the Brexit ballot, voters “went to sleep in Great Britain and woke up in Little England”, an England (and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) that dreamed to be at least imaginatively or metaphorically rural. Going still further, what I have termed elsewhere, drawing on Smith (1996), a “revanchist rural” has been able to feed well on Brexit rhetoric to become still more alive across the rural UK. Revanchism in this context seeks to reassert a relatively narrowly “traditional” rural geography against the pushes for diversification sought, somewhat ironically, by *both* more liberal and more neo-liberal rural futures (Halfacree, 2020). And whilst the Covid-19 disaster’s consequences for the rural UK at first may seem to challenge this narrow and exclusive essentialist momentum, the chapter will now argue that, in fact, it has helped this reactionary project still more through its negative impact on widening access to the rural UK within a newly resurgent and increasingly dominant political divide of rural versus urban (drawing on Niven, 2020).

### **Covid-19: setting back access to rural space**

Writing in 2022 rather than 2016, the uncertainty and possible retrenchment Brexit has stimulated for the rural UK’s fate is further enhanced via the also very much still-ongoing experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic (Eggel *et al.*, 2020). As with Brexit, however, its full rural significance has taken a little while to be noted, with Reed (2021: np) observing how “The pandemic has been framed too often through the urban experience of locked down and deserted cities, of people leaving urban life for a rural sanctuary”. A key immediate direction of enquiry to take from this observation, which leads away from simply staying in these deserted (*sic.*) cities, is to follow these “urban exiles” and consider both their subsequent rural experiences and then those of the UK’s pre-Covid rurally located people. Much more so nationally than for Brexit, the predominant urban UK world has seemingly once again “discovered” the rural as something very much to be experientially engaged with. But, as with matters of the heart, the joys of the resulting entanglements vary considerably between the parties involved.

### ***Of urban recuperation beyond the city***

As McAreavey notes (Chapter 2), Covid-19 quickly brought to centre-stage the values of rural as a low population density, clean air and supposedly, at least initially, almost virus-free space (on the latter, see Malatzky *et al.*, 2020). This particularly



emerged from a commonplace response to one of the themes that quickly became an absolutely defining feature of the pandemic, namely that of the stress, anxiety and general mental ill health that was especially associated with experiencing lockdown conditions (e.g., *Guardian*, 2020a). Moreover, this was a condition also clearly spatial(ised), being overwhelmingly urban. And, as is frequently the case, when the urban becomes associated so strongly with something, our commonplace dualistic thinking soon associates the rural with its opposite. Specifically, pandemic news reports quickly switched attention from bemoaning urban mental stress to observing and celebrating how the rural UK was coming across strongly and effectively as a source of feelings of rejuvenation, connection and inspiration in these troubled times. This was true both for those urban residents visiting temporarily for their fix of “green Prozac” (Barkham, 2020) to those seeking more permanent reduced urban lockdown stress via residential relocation.

For the short-term fix seekers, the therapeutic experience of the rural UK was soon linked more specifically with being able to engage with “nature” first-hand. The supposed benefits of doing so are well summarised by Jones (2020a: 4; also Jones, 2020b; *Guardian*, 2021b) as how:

[t]ime spent in nature is linked to lower stress, restored attention, a balanced nervous system, increased levels of cancer-fighting “natural killer cells”, the activation of neural pathways associated with calm, and decreased levels of anxiety and depression.

Or, as McCarthy (2020: 9) equally confidently summarised it:

[the] natural world is there for us, even in pandemics, even in lockdowns; it is there to console and repair and recharge us, often unrecognised and unacknowledged, but still giving life to every one of us, regardless.

Clearly linked with this general contextual relational (re)connection to nature, also seen as a balm for loneliness (e.g., *Guardian*, 2021f), was a resurgence in walking (e.g., *Guardian*, 2021j), with a resultant “walk in the woods” further saluted for having the potential to save the UK’s National Health Service much money (e.g., *Guardian*, 2021b).

For others of Reed’s (2021) urban refugee population, however, simply going for a walk in the country was insufficient. Instead, the Covid-19 pandemic saw a resurgence in declared interest in more permanent counterurban residential relocation. Evidence for this resurgence also came through quickly, with estate agents celebrating early in 2020 the considerable interest urban people were showing in possibly moving to rural areas or small towns (e.g., *Guardian*, 2020b). Whilst we must be wary of this source<sup>2</sup> and await the results of more academic investigations, the potential relocation trend was soon widely noted. A key standout feature within it was of younger adults that the usual counterurbanisation cohort expressing distaste for the “metropolitan life”. As one intending rural relocater put it, many young adults seemingly now have “a lot more faith in the countryside

since the pandemic hit” (quoted in *Guardian*, 2021c: 3). Promises of less stress and more space seemed to have been crucial here (e.g., *Guardian*, 2021d, 2021e).

As will be developed in the next sub-section, this interest does seem to have stimulated at least some counterurbanisation, which soon came to be associated with rising rural house prices. Indeed, the latter may be one of its most enduring legacies, since emerging research is now suggesting that the “Covid exodus” has not been anything like as noted as it seemed it would become a couple of years earlier (e.g., *Guardian*, 2022b). Perhaps some potential new rural residents have taken heed of experiences that warned them that the rural UK “isn’t a blank slate for restless urbanites; nor... [reducible] to an amenity for leisure and recreation” (Ware, 2022: np)?

In summary, in spite of the latter qualifications, for Reed’s (2021) urban refugees overall, the Covid-19 pandemic saw the rural UK widely celebrated as a highly desirable place to experience, a recuperative heterotopic space “outside” the city (Halfacree, 2018). Under the menacing shadow of Covid-19, the “urban” shift[ed] from places of sophistication to places of threat[,] while “rural” shift[ed] from rustic to safe’ (Malatzky *et al.*, 2020: 3). Or, put slightly differently:

The country in the city discovers the country outside the city. With all the advantages of urban life removed – culture, other people, internationalism – many people decide they’d rather not be there.

(Bathurst, 2021: 217)

However, this seemingly positive experiential position for an emerging post-Covid rural – as with Brexit – again all too easily bypasses and overlooks the experiences and reactions of people already living in the UK countryside. It is to them the chapter now turns.

### ***Of rural experiences “at home”***

First, there was the feared potential of “outsiders” bringing Covid-19 into rural communities, whose previous isolation had often meant they had experienced little of the pandemic (Malatzky *et al.*, 2020). In this context, one may perhaps be understanding of residents requesting that, for example, owners of second home and caravanners did not come to their area to self-isolate (BBC, 2021). However, a desire to exclude “outsiders” could soon manifest itself in much more negative ways. For example, it was argued to stoke rural racism (Taylor, 2020), including a targeting of Gypsies and other Travellers, exemplified by ethnic tensions rising in a small town with a Covid-19 outbreak following an engagement party on a Travellers’ site (*Guardian*, 2020c).

Second, more permanent in-migration of “urban refugees” in the wake of a (post-) Covid-19 “race for space” (for example *Guardian*, 2021d, 2021e) has also potentially amplified the “classic” challenge for many rural families to find affordable housing when financially out-competed by wealthier in-migrants, and that is when any rural housing is even available! A further spin on this broad historical and

geographical challenge has been the parallel resurgence of the equally “wicked problem” (Chapter 5) of the fear of “cultural genocide” in some rural Welsh-speaking communities from the rise of second-home purchases by non-Welsh-speakers (e.g., *Guardian*, 2021g).

All together, and in the wake of possibly rather premature talk of “degentrification” impacting large cities across the global north in the wake of Covid-19, we can usefully reposition the rival concept of “disaster gentrification” (Hyra and Lees, 2021) to apply to the rural in reflection of the exclusionary potential of any intensification of the already well-established gentrification of much of the rural UK (see Phillips and Smith, 2018). Clearly, analysis will need to get beyond the already-noted vested interests seeking to “talk up” rural in-migration. However, from the perspective of this chapter, an enhanced gentrifying consequence, even if more imagined than apparent on the ground, will again do nothing to promote human geography diversity for the rural UK.

Again as with Brexit, experience of Covid-19 also presented opportunities to rethink and ideally then remodel some rural UK practices along more diverse and egalitarian lines. Results have been patchy to date, however. For example, from the agricultural sector, as a result of Covid-19’s dramatic acceleration of the loss of migrant labour that Brexit had set in play, a national attempt to persuade unemployed British people – often as a result of Covid-19’s job shakeouts – to take up jobs in the fields or food packing plants failed spectacularly (Milbourne and Coulson, 2021). *Pick for Britain*’s desire to recreate World War Two’s widely celebrated *Land Army* fell at the first hurdle as potential recruits soon noted the harsh working and living conditions they were expected to endure (ibid.). A chance was seemingly missed to at least improve an historically highly exploited group’s working conditions (Harris, 2021) as the Covid-19 experience ultimately failed to open-up the rural to new actors or improve a lot of its existing workers. The pre-existing severe system simply strove to keep going and re-establish itself with a failed and still unresolved attempt to recruit different frontline workers.

### ***Post-Covid-19 rural revanchism***

Reflecting on the admittedly still far from certain post-Covid-19 situation, an overall consequence of *both* the seemingly positive offers emanating from rural areas to urban Britons and the contested experienced reality on the ground for the rural population has been a further reassertion of the post-Brexit revanchist rural. In the shadow of Covid-19, in line with the revanchist rural’s representation, rural “[h]omogeneity has become safety, simplicity... freedom, and resistance to change... predictability” (Malatzky *et al.*, 2020: 2). It is further manifest, for example, in perceptions of “rural locations as places of “whiteness” [that] may have been an unspoken driver for the movement of city people to rural locations” (ibid.). Both the agents of a new “colonial countryside” (Ware, 2022) *and* those challenging such a rural fate on the ground may together be complicit in pushing forward further the post-Brexit revanchist rural UK. And yet, as the chapter’s

conclusion will now suggest, such a fate should not be regarded as inevitable and a counter-narrative is also there to take forward.

### **Conclusion: for a counter-narrative to inspire a defiantly alive and richly diverse rural**

This chapter began with a reference to Keith Hoggart's sharp critical observations on the state of the rural today. For Hoggart (1988, 1990), "rural" was largely "dead" as a legitimate category within scholarship. In contrast, this chapter has suggested that whilst both Brexit and Covid-19 herald uncertain, problematic and probably often hard times ahead for the rural UK, they also paradoxically express just how "alive" the rural actually still is in 2022. As noted in this chapter's introduction, they have pushed the UK rural centre-stage (Chapter 2), with it certainly meriting some post-Hoggart academic spotlight. More broadly, the present book's chapters have revealed how often well-embedded and taken-for-granted processes that have sought to shape or produce a more-or-less distinctive rural the UK now strive for new lives without, *inter alia*, their EU former companion. Moreover, they are seeking to do this in the light of additional pressures an unwanted Covid-19 fellow-traveller has frequently brought to them. Put a little differently, Brexit and Covid-19 both have more-or-less distinctive "rural geographies", all surely more than enough to reinforce how "rural" is defiantly alive. It is also from the point of view of very many – myself included – a category well worth fighting with and for. And here specifically, we do not have to accept the hegemony of the revanchist rural that this chapter has suggested both Brexit and Covid-19 have nourished.

In terms of the challenge ahead in forging a fully active counter-narrative to rural revanchism, first consider celebrated Lake District farmer, rural campaigner and writer James Rebanks's reflections on Brexit when a guest on the online interview programme *A Drink With...* (Rebanks, 2021). Rebanks summarised the situation for his largely urban-based audience by saying that Brexit presented the UK rural with a choice of "three doors". Going through the first, we can simply reproduce and duplicate European policy, in which case he asked what was the point of Brexit for rural areas? This route certainly does not seem to be the way things are going, as this chapter has suggested. Second, we can get "in bed with gangsters" – as he delicately put it – and drive through free trade policies that leave little protection for rural people and places that cannot or will not compete at this level. Such a route bodes well neither for the UK's farmers, as this chapter has also noted, nor for the UK engaging significantly with global challenges such as reducing long-distance dependencies and energy use. Third, Rebanks argued that we can do something better and different for rural areas that, extending his argument a little, supports its people and places within an alignment also highly beneficial for the environment and humanity's wider futures. He called for this latter path to be chosen, a similar routing to that expressed through Mark Shucksmith's (2018) *Good Countryside*.<sup>3</sup>

Entering the battle once again over rural representations (Halfacree, 1993, 2015; McAreavey, Chapter 2), the Good Countryside is set up by Shucksmith as a rival to the seemingly ubiquitous “rural idyll”. The latter he describes as “a visioning of rural areas by a hegemonic middle-class culture” (Shucksmith, 2018: 163), riddled with nostalgia and working to exacerbate rural inequality and disadvantage. As noted in this chapter, such a representation works excellently with and for rural revanchism. In contrast, the Good Countryside expresses a utopian alternative through four Rs (*ibid.*: 166–168, adapted a little):

- Repair: keep in good condition all dimensions of the rural “infrastructure”, from the physical/ecological to the humans living and experiencing the area;
- Relatedness: recognise, support and promote diversity and difference across the rural population;
- Rights: create more widespread and diverse empowered participation across all those with a rural living;
- Re-enchantment: explore, recognise and celebrate the diverse “magic” that is expressed by and through rural place(s).

Striving for a Good Countryside for the rural UK, it is critical to note somewhat paradoxically that whilst Brexit and Covid-19 may have promoted a revanchist rural of inwardly-focused reactionary selectivity, this occurred, in part, as a countering reaction to Brexit’s opening-up of debates on the future of the countryside and Covid-19’s promotion of “green Prozac” for a multiply “locked-down” urban population. Both these dimensions allow advocates of a Good Countryside into the debate, through *not* accepting their effective ongoing suppression that this chapter has outlined and warned of. Instead, inspired by the four Rs, Good Countryside proponents must take the numerous cues, expressions and experiences that have been exposed via Brexit and Covid-19 to promote a UK rural that cares for people and place, celebrates diversity and connections, empowers its people from multiple directions, and marvels at the defiantly alive 21st century rural UK. Brexit’s “window of opportunity” for novel and progressive changes in rural policies and practices must be grasped and Covid-19’s diverse celebration of rural experience carried forward. There is still time for this as nothing is yet firmly set in stone, as the present overall book makes clear. From living rewarding and inspiring everyday lives to engaging with more global human existential questions, the rural UK has many roles to play. And, yes, if successful, this will certainly require substantial revision of Contemporary Rural Britain once again...!

## Notes

- 1 Whilst 52 percent of the votes supported Brexit, turnout was 72 percent, so only around 36 percent of the eligible adult population actively voted for the UK to leave the EU (Electoral Commission no date).
- 2 Estate agents clearly had a vested interest in talking-up this trend, with Ware (2022: np) noting how *Rightmove*, the property-listings website, had a prominent billboard outside London’s Finsbury Park underground station which ‘depict[ed] the English

countryside as one big meadow – a grassy landscape devoid of people, buildings or roads, imprinted with the words “Explore the life that could be...”.

- 3 Both Rebanks’s and Shucksmith’s ideas also resonate with a range of other ‘radical rural’ manifestos, such as calls to promote an ‘alter-rurality’ (Versteegh and Meeres, 2014) but the present chapter does not have the space to develop these connections.

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