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## England's Rural Futures Project: Scenario Creation & Backcasting

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**Authors:** Sami Mahroum [sami.mahroum@arcs.ac.at](mailto:sami.mahroum@arcs.ac.at)  
**Sponsors:** The programme was initiated by DEFRA Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.  
**Type:** regional  
**Organizer:** The Future Foundation and the Centre for Rural Economy at Newcastle University.  
**Duration:** One year      **Budget:** 125k£      **Time Horizon:** 2024 and 2054      **Date of Brief:** Aug. 2007

### Purpose

Rural Futures is a study of what the English countryside might look like in 20 and 50 years time, from a social geographical perspective. Its overall purpose is to help policy makers and local communities clarify their objectives for the future and what needs to be done over the next few years to ensure that they are on a trajectory towards a desired and feasible scenario. The project addressees are therefore decision makers in all levels of government.

### From Backcasting to Recommendations about the Future

The foresight project had the following objectives:

- To build a 'futures' knowledge base to support a participatory process of scenario building and predictive forecasts
- To conduct a backcasting process to discuss what policy interventions might be required to make the desired scenarios (or aspects of a scenario) a reality
- To assimilate the learning into a set of clear insights and strategic recommendations
- To conduct an appraisal process to assess the success of the scenario-building and backcasting techniques.

### Iterative Approach

The project comprised a number of iterative stages:

- A **Rural Futures Knowledge Base** was created, summarising existing data and knowledge of key drivers affecting the countryside now and in the future.
- A map of the differentiated countryside was created through a statistical analysis of the 1991 and 2001 census.
- **Seven scenarios** were constructed, three 20 year scenarios that were created using a multivariate modelling of most influential drivers of change (selected by the project team and vetted by the Steering Group), and four 50 year scenarios were created through a one-day workshop to which Blue Skies experts provided a view of change over a 50 year time horizon in a range of fields. The scenarios were presented in the visual forms created as part of a wider explanation of the process, to different groups for consultation.
- Four **public focus groups** were held in Ashford, Kent and Alnwick, Northumberland in which participants also built



their own 20 year scenarios and commented on the 'expert' visions.

- A one-day **stakeholder workshop** with 50 participants drawn from the widest possible array of rural stakeholder organisations was held.
- Descriptions of the scenarios were placed on a special section of the **Future Foundation web site** and over 200 organisations were invited to give feedback. 56 forms were received via the web site and 16 via email and post.
- Initial backcasting analysis by the project team informed the design of two participative and highly structured **regional backcasting workshops** – one in Northumberland and one in Surrey in which groups worked to selected de-

sired or to be avoided outcomes from the 50 year scenarios, and identified the actions and decisions that would be needed to create this future.

- Four Project Steering Group meetings were held during the course of the project at which advice, comment and input on the project design, objectives and implementation was sought and fed into the iterative process. This Steering Group included representatives from Defra's Horizon Scanning Team, Defra's Science Directorate, the Countryside Agency and English Nature.

### Three '20 Years Scenarios': Fostering the Distinctiveness of the Countryside

The three scenarios for 2024 were: *The Consumption Countryside*; *The Rise of the Rurbs*; and *Twenty-First Century Good Life*. These scenarios were derived by projecting present social and economic trends and then making different assumptions on factors that would affect the balance of different types of rural areas across the country. The most important of these assumptions were: the nature of future planning and building policies and the degree of attachment we have as a society to preserving and fostering the distinctiveness of the countryside.

The *Consumption Countryside* is effectively a 'central' scenario based upon what are considered to be the *most likely* outcomes in these regards. The two 'alternative' scenarios are those that would result from a divergence from anticipated trends, *The Rurbs* resulting from liberal planning policies allowing 'rural suburbs' to spread and the *21<sup>st</sup> Century Good Life* resulting from stronger planning controls and investment in protecting the countryside.

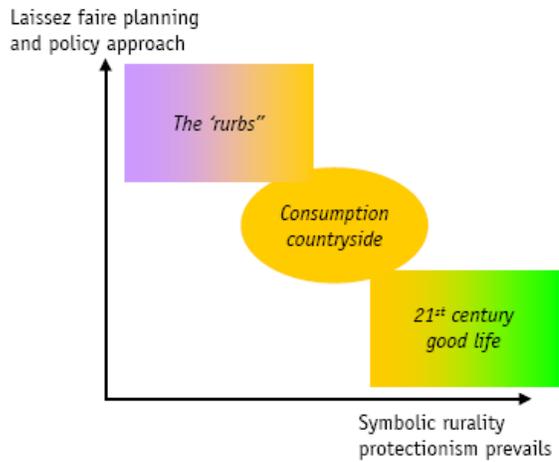


Figure 1: Three scenarios for 2024

### The '50 Years Scenarios': Four Types of 'Rural Idyll'

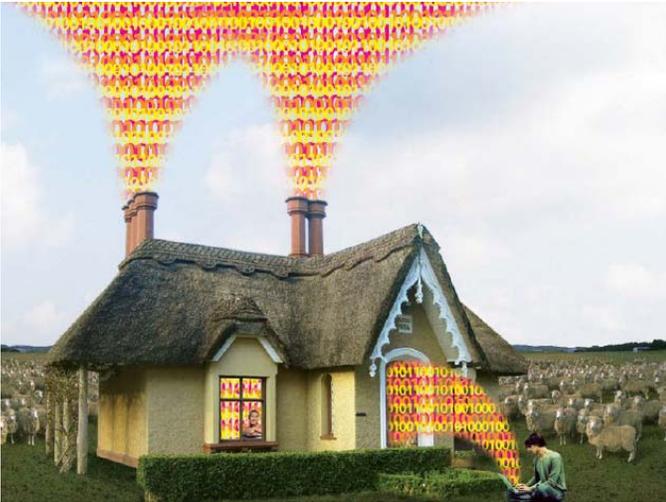
Each of the 50-year scenarios represents a different type of quality of life that might be available in the future and would therefore imply different evolving understandings on the part of the population as to what 'rural idyll' meant. The four scenarios were the following:



*Vibrant Variety* is relatively socially and economically liberal, and has freedom and diversity as key elements of its idyllic appeal.



*Preserved Heritage* has heritage environmental protection as the key elements of its idyllic appeal.



*Garden and Guilds* is economically dynamic, but with activity rooted in strong, but modern social networks.



*Fortresses and Fences* is based on an economically liberal model in which the rural idyll is overtly aspirational – only available for the wealthiest in their enclosed, privileged and privatised areas.

## Key Findings

There are a number of key points that have emerged from an examination of the scenarios and the backcasting outputs that appear to offer significant insights into the nature of the challenges facing Defra in its strategic planning and futures work.

**No single scenario delivers all of government's (Defra) strategic objectives:** First and foremost is the simple observa-

tion that there is no one scenario that delivers strongly on all of government's objectives for the countryside as itemised in the Rural Strategy Review 2004.

**The challenge is to balance competing objectives:** The most obvious policy tensions emerge from the difficulty in balancing activities that are currently conceptualised as oppositions: economic liberalism and social inclusion; environmental sustainability and a more liberal planning regime.

**Innovative and creative policy approaches are required:**

Despite the enormous efforts made in the scenario creation process to shift perceptions and encourage fresh thinking about the components of the rural future and how these will interact, people remain hidebound by stereotypical views.

**No major disrupting events are expected and strong social norms will continue to lead the future:** The scenarios do not effectively embody the impact of any major disruptive events in the future.

**Key objectives are conceived of as outcomes and not seen as directly created by policy action:**

Only certain components of the rural future are conceived of as actively shaping the future (such as the economy, transport and education) whereas those that represent many of government's objectives - good environment, biodiversity, social inclusion, quality of life - are conceptualised as outcomes, not drivers.

**Major ethical questions are raised about the nature and beneficiaries of the scenarios:** Each scenario raised major

ethical questions amongst participants and consultees, particularly during the Backcasting workshop, about the nature of the future world and who would be the major constituents and beneficiaries of the countryside.

**Creating a coherent view of urban-rural inter-relationships is vital:** Throughout, the problem of creating rural scenarios without specific reference to urban developments is highlighted. Every scenario implies the relative development and attractiveness of urban centres that would make a particular scenario likely or feasible. An integrated future reality of rural, urban and suburban areas is assumed if not made explicit.

**Policy integration across all departments is essential:** The strong social nature of scenarios highlights the requirement for effective integration of policy formulation and delivery across all government departments impacting on the rural population. There has to be the ability, when creating and dissecting future visions of this kind, to address all aspects of the future society that they depict and address the future needs of the population.

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## Can Rural Life Compete in the Long Run?

A number of other specific issues have emerged for policy-makers to consider:

- The degree of rural subsidy implied by any trajectory and whether this is likely to be sustainable in the political environment expected over the next 20 years – and to what extent different scenarios and hence trajectories will be affected by a change in political environment or the economic growth necessary to support subsidy.

- The role of innovation and enterprise in diversifying the economic base of rural areas and integrating them into nearby urban and global economies. It is unlikely in any scenario that traditional rural activities will generate economic growth without the multiplier effect of new occupations and/or large subsidy.
- How to maintain the aspects that potentially give rural areas a competitive advantage in attracting visitors, residents and economic activity. Particularly important, apart from infrastructure issues, may be how to ensure that the social and cultural capital associated with rural settlements is maintained as the economic and population base changes.
- Thinking more creatively about what can be positive assets of rural areas – such as older people – and what mix of services and support is necessary to support and develop those assets.

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## Sources and References

- Scenario Creation and Backcasting: Summary Report and Recommendations: A Future Foundation Report, 2005. <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cre/publish/otherpublications/ruralfuturesprojectfinaldec05.pdf>

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**About the EFMN:** Policy Professionals dealing with RTD, Innovation and Economic Development increasingly recognize a need to base decisions on broadly based participative processes of deliberation and consultation with stakeholders. One of the most important tools they apply is FORESIGHT. The EFMN or European Foresight Monitoring Network supports policy professionals by monitoring and analyzing Foresight activities in the European Union, its neighbours and the world. The EFMN helps those involved in policy development to stay up to date on current practice in Foresight. It helps them to tap into a network of know-how and experience on issues related to the day to day design, management and execution of Foresight and Foresight related processes.