



Attitudes to housing and planning policy in rural localities: Disparities between long-term and mobile rural populations in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the counterurbanisation and rural gentrification literature, in this paper we seek to contribute to understanding residents' perspectives on the balance between housing and environment in rural localities. Migration and socio-cultural change in rural localities provide a key driver underpinning land-use and housing policy, by not only underpinning the reconfiguration of rural housing markets and housing demand, but also by introducing a new mix of attitudes and social aspirations in rural localities that increasingly frame rural planning debates. Using Ireland as a case study, we firstly explore the nature of rural migration processes arguing that rural mobilities are complex and nuanced, involving counterurban service-class movements but also local, lateral and return migration. Secondly, we test the hypothesis that the residential status (i.e. long term or newcomer) and social class status ascribed to rural residents have an impact on their views on planning and housing. While differences in attitudes are present, there was also a high degree of similarity between different groups with respect to accommodating new housing in rural localities. This reflects both a period of rapid rural change in Ireland, but also is indicative of the nature of rural migration processes whereby recent movers to rural areas may hold similar values and norms to the established local community.

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Introduction

Perhaps one of the most controversial and visible indicators of rural land-use change relates to an increased demand for house-building in rural areas fuelled, in part, by the growing demands of affluent households for rural residence and counterurban lifestyles (Champion, 1998; Mitchell, 2004), and, to a lesser extent, the demand for second homes (Gallent, 2009a). Many rural localities in Europe have experienced extensive restructuring of housing and land markets in recent decades, leading to both a transformation of rural social geographies and to physical change in the rural landscape as a result of new housing development. Non-metropolitan or exurban population growth has been a key feature of this spatial reconfiguration since the 1970s (Berry, 1976) and an increase in demand for housing in rural localities has been recorded in European, North American and Australian contexts (Champion, 1989; Dahms and McComb, 1999; Curran, 2008). For those seeking a 'rural lifestyle', the rural landscape is central in the consumption process; however, paradoxically the increased demand for a 'place in

the country' often diminishes a locality's 'rural character' as exurban rural landscapes become increasingly defined by incremental suburbanisation or 'rural sprawl'.

Drawing on the counterurbanisation and rural gentrification literature, in this paper we seek to contribute further to understanding rural residents' perspectives on the balance between housing and environment. This has been a recurring theme in the rural planning literature, particularly in the UK, where seminal studies by Pahl (1966), Hall et al. (1973), Newby (1979) and Ambrose (1992) drew attention to the new rural middle class (exurbanites), which sought to reshape planning debates to preserve an exclusive countryside and to enhance or protect their own property prices by promoting rural preservation and mobilising against new house-building in rural localities. In-migration and socio-cultural change in rural localities provide a key driver underpinning land-use and housing policy, by not only underpinning the reconfiguration of rural housing markets and housing demand but also by introducing a new mix of attitudes and social aspirations into rural localities that increasingly frame rural planning debates (Gallent, 2009b). In contrast to the dominant UK literature, in this paper we explore these themes in a rural context characterised by rapid increases in housing supply, by exploring attitudes to rural planning and house-building in rural localities during the tail-end of the so-called Celtic Tiger boom (or property bubble) in Ireland.

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The objectives of the paper are, first, to review the characteristics of rural migration in Ireland and, secondly, to evaluate attitudes to rural planning amongst rural residents during a period of economic growth and significant housing construction. The hypothesis tested here is that the residential status (i.e. long term or newcomer) and social class status ascribed to rural residents have an impact on their views on planning and housing. Three such rural residential groups have been identified in this research: permanent households; (potentially) gentrifier migrant households; and non-gentrifier migrant households. Empirically, the paper is based on survey data collected in three contrasting case studies in rural Ireland ($N=1031$) involving a series of questions and responses to statements about housing and planning issues. We argue that rural mobility in Ireland is far from a case of city-to-country relocations of middle class residents and that this mosaic of rural residents (new and permanent, local and non-local, gentrifiers and non-gentrifiers), while holding diverse views, also exhibit shared values and attitudes towards rural change and development in the countryside. The paper is structured as follows: firstly, we examine the literature surrounding rural land-use conflicts underpinned by shifting social geographies in rural localities. Secondly, we provide a brief overview of rural planning policy and practice in Ireland, before outlining our research methodology. Then, we outline our research findings, highlighting firstly the extent of gentrification in our case study localities, followed by analysis of attitudes towards rural change among long term residents and recent movers. Finally, in the conclusions, we develop transferable insights in relation to the implications of our findings for planning practice in rural areas.

Long-term residents, migrant rural populations and rural conflicts

‘... [T]he single most important social change to have occurred in the countryside in recent years has concerned the changing social and occupational composition of the countryside ... [W]hen we examine social change in rural England we must not only take account of changes within agriculture but of changes on the interface between the ‘truly rural’ (i.e. agricultural) inhabitants and the ‘adventitious’ population of exurbanite newcomers who have moved into the countryside in such great numbers since the war ... [M]any of the controversies and conflicts which permeate contemporary rural life either stem from this fundamental change ... or are exasperated by it’ (Newby, 1979, p. 153)

Over 30 years ago, Howard Newby’s influential work on social change in rural England highlighted the impact of the influx of affluent, urban newcomers on everyday life and local politics in English villages. Specifically, Newby identified the influence of large numbers of ‘urban-based’ in-migrants who often sought to impose their view of the rural as ‘picturesque, ancient and unchanging’ in pursuit of their rural idyll. The contrast between social norms and mores between those ‘born and bred’ in a rural locality and newcomers, Newby argued, often underpinned local conflicts associated with environmental issues and local housing provision, providing a key departure point for rural studies research over the last three decades.

These themes were significantly developed during the 1990s with a series of publications exploring the ‘differentiated countryside’ in the UK (Marsden et al., 1993; Munton, 1995; Lowe et al., 1993; Marsden, 1998; Murdoch et al., 2003). This body of work suggested that the key to understanding socio-political processes in rural areas is the heterogeneity across rural space, as new patterns of diversity and differentiation emerge across rural localities in relation to governance and regulative processes. Marsden et al. (1993) provide a four-fold typical classification of rural areas in the

English countryside (also developed in Marsden, 1998; Murdoch et al., 2003), which provides useful insights in understanding the regulation of land in the face of shifting rural social geographies:

1. *the preserved countryside*: characterised by strong anti-development and preservationist attitudes and decision-making. There are strongly entrenched middle class factions who can impose their views throughout the planning system on potential developers.
2. *the contested countryside*: refers to areas that lie outside the main commuter catchments. Farmers and development interests tend to be politically dominant, but are increasingly opposed by incomers who adopt similar positions to the preserved countryside. The development process is marked by increasing conflict between these old and new social groups.
3. *the paternalistic countryside*: refers to areas where large private estates and large farms still dominate, and the development process is primarily shaped by established land owners and/or large owner-occupied farms.
4. *the clientelistic countryside*: likely to be found in remote rural regions where agriculture and its associated political institutions still have power. Processes of rural development have traditionally been dominated by farming, landowning, local capital and state agencies, usually working in close corporatist relationships. Local politics tends to be dominated by employment concerns and the welfare of the rural ‘community’.

Within this context, housing, development and land-use planning emerges as a key arena where rural conflicts are ‘played out’ as long-term and new rural populations seek to maintain or exert power to pursue their interests. Rural housing provides one of the most visible and contested indicators of these ‘differentiated’ change processes, where the shift to a differentiated countryside has led in many areas to increased competition for rural resources and land (Lowe et al., 1993). For example, Murdoch and Abram (1998) and Munton (1995) discuss how in the ‘preserved countryside’, new housing development is resisted by middle class interests, leading to a countryside that has become a middle-class residential space and a space of resistance whereby “urban inhabitants seeking access to rural resources, often find their progress hindered by rural residents who had fled the city earlier with the same end in mind” (Munton, 1995, p. 269). In other cases, debates over rural housing supply can spark conflict between environment and development networks (Murdoch et al., 2003), whereas in areas dominated by clientelist politics, housing development and local decision-making often work in line with a localistic set of considerations in which development to meet local needs is routinely seen as an intrinsic part of rural life. Therefore, environmental groups are often perceived as ‘external’ actors, while development interests purport to reflect the interests of the locality and its traditional rural residents (Murdoch et al., 2003). This suggests that the political struggle around rural property rights is being waged by a well-entrenched middle-class, a debt-laden farming sector and a range of other development interests, conducted through the land-use planning arena (Lowe et al., 1993).

More recently, the issues raised by Newby have been further explored through the lens of counterurbanisation studies and an emerging body of literature examining gentrification processes in rural localities (e.g. Stockdale, 2010; Scott, 2011; Shucksmith, 2011; Smith, 2011; Gkartzios and Scott, 2012). Counterurbanisation studies, for example, have focused on shifting rural social geographies and the migration patterns of affluent groups into rural areas: “key features of this counterurbanisation phenomenon include increasing residential mobility, countryside lifestyle preferences, and the involvement of highly educated, qualified and affluent – that is, middle class – migrants” (Stockdale, 2010, p. 31). For Smith and

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