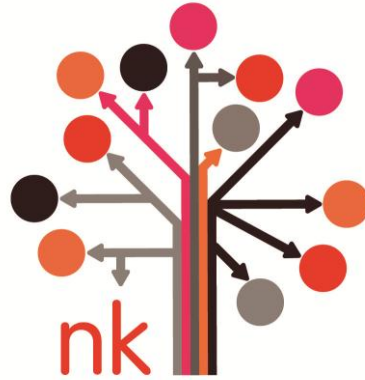


# Northumberland Knowledge



## Know Guide

### How to Define Rural

- November 2012 -

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## About this guide

The Know Guides are a suite of documents that provide useful information about using data and information supplied via the Northumberland Knowledge website.

This guide provides an explanation of approaches used to define rural and urban areas in England. These systems, the Rural/Urban Definition and the Local Authority Rural/Urban Classification are used to express how rural an area is. Detailed information can be found at on the [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs \(DEFRA\) website](#).

[Rural and Urban Statistics in England: Guidance Notes](#) are available on the Office for National Statistics (ONS) website.

For information about geographies referred to in this guide see the **Know Guide on Standard Geography**.

## How to define rural

The Rural/Urban Definition and the Local Authority (LA) Classification are two different systems used to define rural and urban areas. They were developed to produce a rural/urban view of government statistics. The two systems have different methodologies to reflect the numerical significance of different settlement sizes in different geographic frameworks.

The Definition and Classification are based on 2001 census information and postcode data. A number of government organisations and departments are looking into updating the Rural/Urban Definition for use with 2011 Census information.

## Rural/Urban Definition

The Rural/Urban Definition was introduced in 2004 by various government statistical services who commissioned the Rural Evidence Research Centre. The Definition defines the rurality of very small census based areas. Census Output Areas (OAs) are defined by morphology (i.e. the physical form of the settlements) and context (related to the population density of the surrounding areas). All OAs with populations greater than 10,000 were classified as urban. All other OAs were classified as rural.

The Definition assigns output areas to the categories below:

### Morphology

- Urban (with populations over 10,000)
- Town and Fringe
- Village
- Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings

### And context

- Sparse
- Less sparse

This gives eight Urban/Rural classes for OAs (two urban and six rural):

1. Urban (Sparse)
2. Urban (Less Sparse)
3. Town and Fringe (Less Sparse)
4. Town and Fringe (Sparse)
5. Village (Less Sparse)
6. Village (Sparse)
7. Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings (Less Sparse)
8. Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings (Sparse)

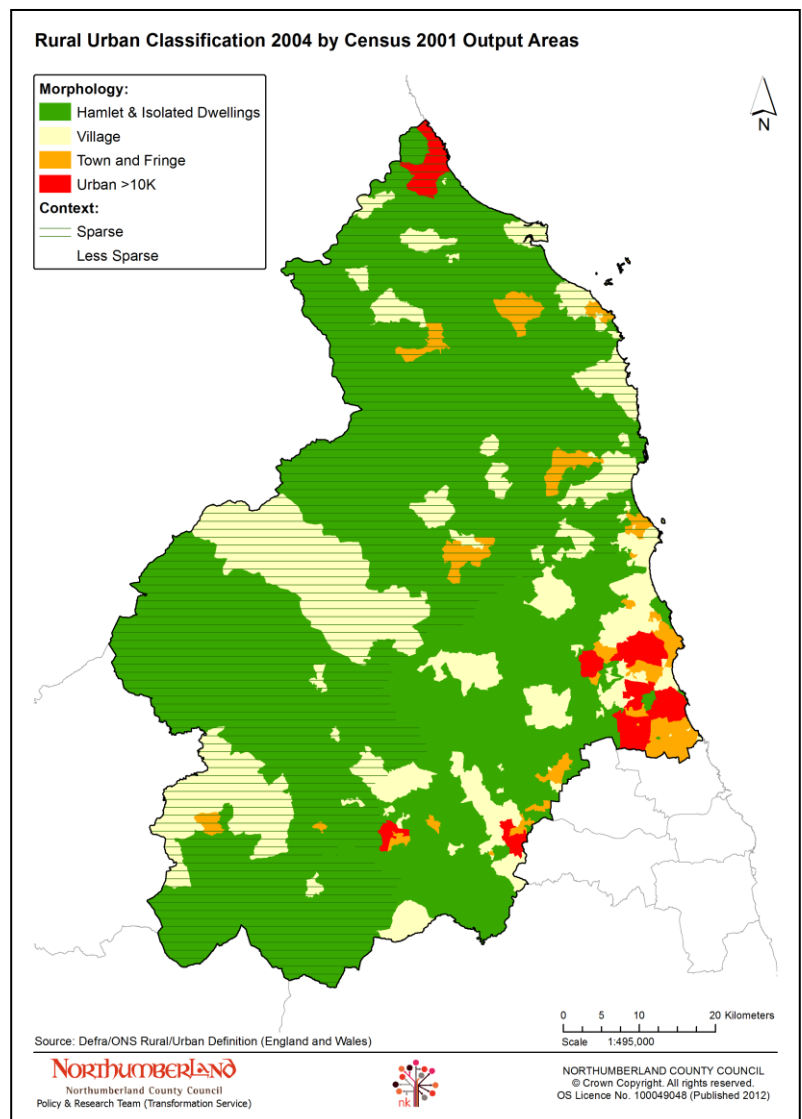
The Rural/Urban Definition can also be used for Super Output Areas (SOAs) and wards. The classification of OAs, SOAs and wards is based on the predominant settlement type within the relevant boundary. For SOAs and wards the settlement classification is condensed into three: Urban, Town and Fringe, and Village, Hamlet and Isolated Dwellings. The context classifications remain the same.

According to the Rural/Urban Definition there were 9.5 million people living in rural settlements at the time of the 2001 Census.

The Definition for OAs, Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs), Middle Layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs) and wards can be downloaded from the [Office for National Statistics website](#). Information is also available on the [Neighbourhood Statistics website](#).

### The Rural/Urban Definition in Northumberland

The map shows the Rural/Urban Definition applied to Northumberland. The green areas are classified as Hamlet and Isolated Dwellings, showing that most of Northumberland is made up of areas in this category. The South East of the county contains more Urban>10k and Town and Fringe areas (red and orange areas). The majority of areas classified as Sparse are to the West and North with the South East classified as less sparse.



## Rural/Urban LA Classification

The Rural/Urban Definition was not considered suitable to apply to data at local authority level and above as their boundaries tend to have a mix of rural and urban areas. Therefore, in 2005, DEFRA, introduced the Rural/Urban LA Classification in order to establish a systematic basis upon which statistical differences between urban and rural areas could be compared for higher level geographies. It is built upon the classification into settlement types of OAs used in the Definition. The system was updated in 2009 following local government reorganisation. Both versions of the classification are available to download from the [ONS website](#). Further information about the classification is available on the [DEFRA website](#).

The aim of the classification is to identify different levels (in terms of the total rural population) and types (in terms of the distribution of rural population in different types of settlements), of rurality and to enable the identification of districts otherwise classified as 'urban' which have significant levels of rural population.

### Six classifications

Six classifications were defined as follows:

- Major Urban: districts with either 100,000 people or 50 per cent of their population in urban areas with a population of more than 750,000
- Large Urban: districts with either 50,000 people or 50 per cent of their population in one of 17 urban areas with a population between 250,000 and 750,000
- Other Urban: districts with less than 26 per cent of their population in rural settlements and larger market towns
- Significant Rural: districts with more than 26 per cent but less than 50 per cent of their population in rural settlements and larger market towns
- Rural-50: districts with at least 50 per cent but less than 80 per cent of their population in rural settlements and larger market towns
- Rural-80: districts with at least 80 per cent of their population in rural settlements and larger market towns.

These six classifications can be further aggregated into three classifications as follows:

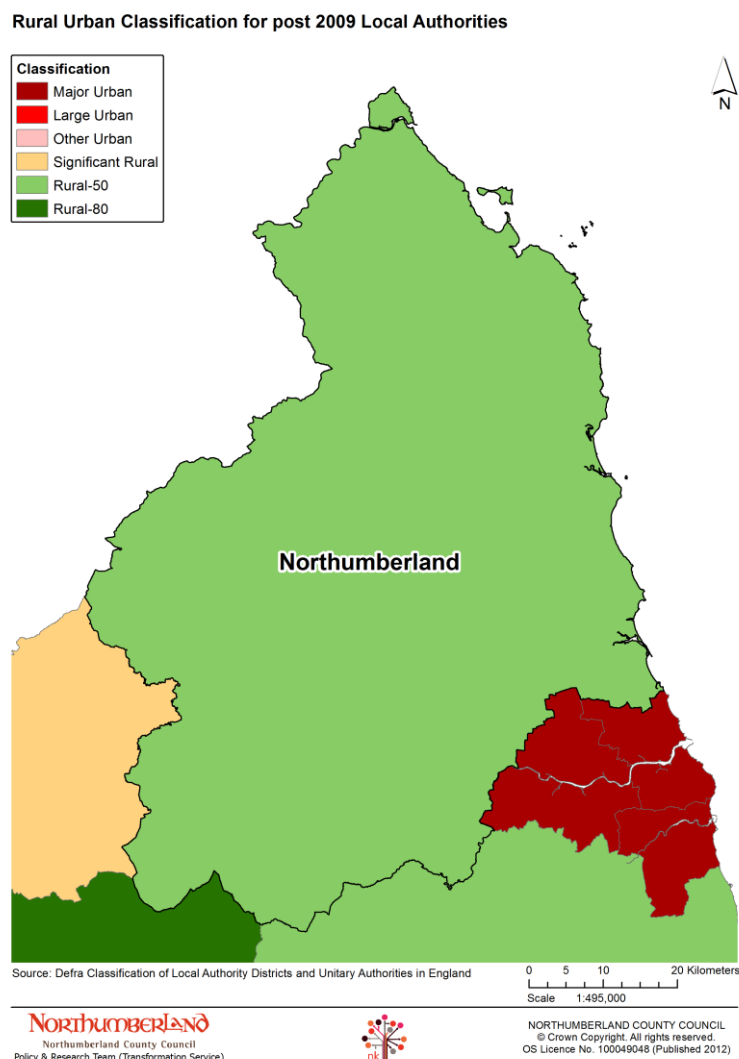
- Predominantly Urban (Major, Large and Other Urban)
- Significant Rural
- Predominantly Rural (Rural-50 and Rural-80)

The three classifications are used for higher level geography groups such as primary care organisations, fire and rescue and police authorities. Details can be found on the [ONS](#) and [DEFRA](#) websites.

It is also possible to further sub divide each of the six main groups into two, based on whether they contain a significant amount of rural population (for Major, Large and Other Urban groups) or a particular type of rurality (for Significant Rural, Rural-50 and Rural-80 groups).

### The Rural/Urban LA Classification in Northumberland

The map below illustrates that as of the last 2009 update, Northumberland was classified as being “Rural-50” with 62,700 of the population living in more urban areas. The classification was updated in 2009 to reflect changes due to local government reorganisation. The previous version of the classification categorised some district councils in Northumberland as Rural-80 with only Blyth Valley and Wansbeck classified as Rural-50.



## **When to use the Rural/Urban Definition or the LA Classification**

When deciding which system to use, first establish what the lowest geographic level the data are available at. Where data are below the LA level and the OA, LSOA, MSOA or ward is known the Definition must be used to produce rural and urban totals. Where LA level data are the lowest available then the LA Classification should be used. For data at higher level geographies, classification into the three wider categories of the LA classification is recommended.

## **How to use the Rural/Urban Definition and the LA Classification**

The Rural/Urban Definition and LA Classification are designed as statistical tools to allow for the analysis and reporting of data that can be geographically referenced. This may include social, demographic and economic variables. They can be used to examine if particular indicators have markedly different values in different types of urban and rural areas e.g., employment levels, crime. For example, it would be possible to use the Definition to look at how economic activity rates in villages compare to the national average. The Definition can help to assess whether various policies impact differently across the different settlement types and context.

The flexibility of the Definition and the different settlement types and context categories allows for a rich and diverse description of rural areas and analysis of rural issues. The use of these areas as the geographic base for the Definition provides stability which allows for the comparison of data over time.

## **How not to use the Rural/Urban Definition and the LA Classification**

The Rural/Urban Definition and the LA Classification are tools for presenting and analysing data, the latter for data only available at LA level and above. They should not be viewed as a continuous geographic hierarchy of rurality beginning with OAs and wards and moving up to LAs and higher geographies. Different principles and criteria apply to the Definition and Classification and very different rural population totals are derived from a district level of aggregation compared to one based on smaller areas.

Whilst the Definition is useful for broad analysis of areas it is less useful to consider the characteristics of individual local areas. The classifications are not based on the 'look' or 'feel' of a place but on a set of definitions and rules and therefore may feel wrong for particular areas. The classifications may be a useful starting point but there are other issues and measures that should also be considered. They should not be used to define what is countryside and what is town.



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