

Summary and Implications for Policy

1 Introduction

This is the report on a background study for the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) regarding the Irish Rural Structure. The main objective of the study was to “develop, using demographic, economic and geographical data, a typology of rural areas in Ireland and their main characteristics. The typology should be developed at a geographical scale that enables practical regional and sub-regional comparisons to be made”.

The study also examined: trends within these areas and the outlook for them; the relationship between urban and rural areas; and the role of infrastructure in rural area performance. This Summary presents selected principal findings only. More detailed results are contained in the Main Report.

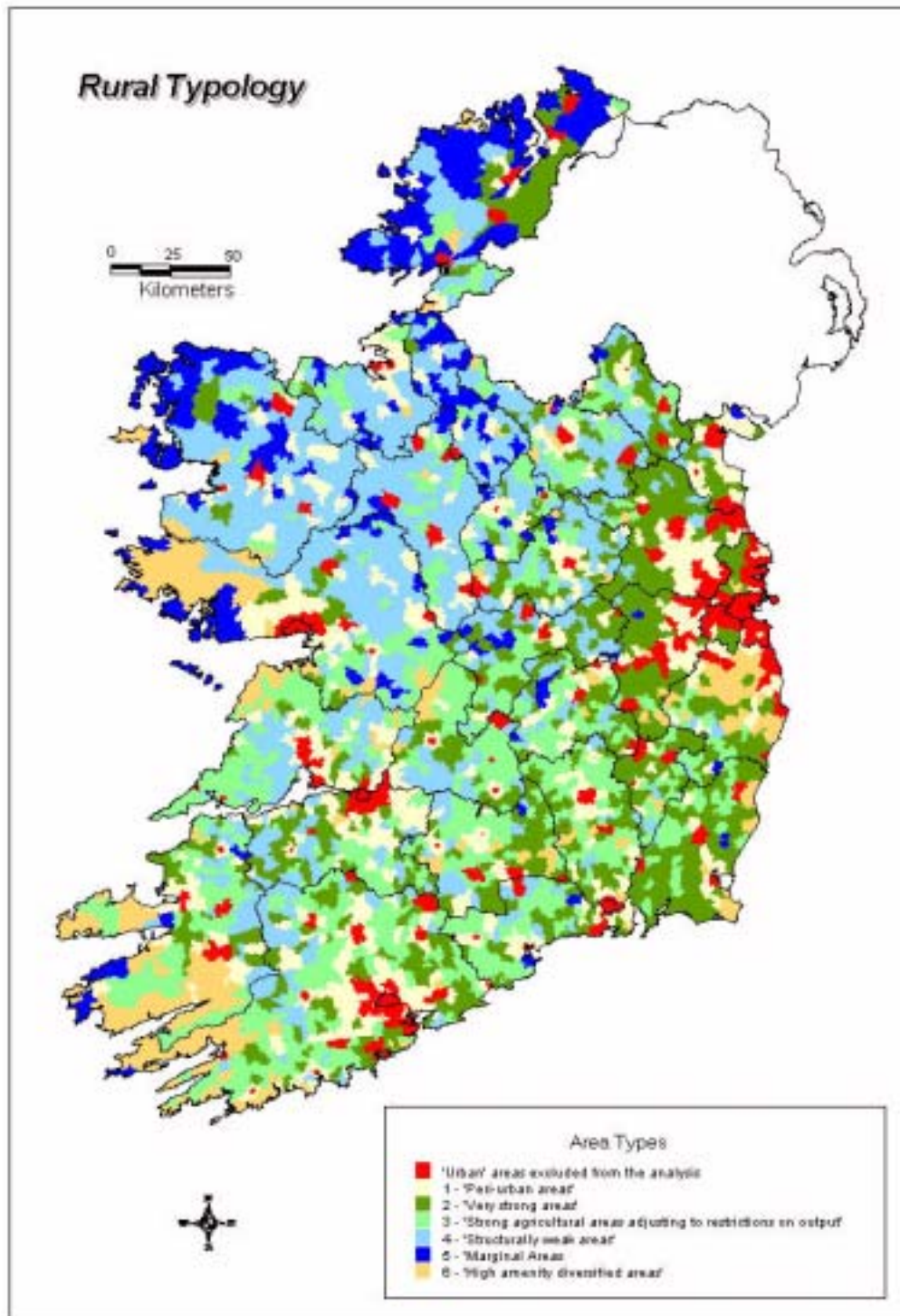
The overall study approach has been one of a high level of quantification, drawing mainly on the Census of Population 1996. This focus reflects a desire to contribute analytically to much discussed but seldom systematically assessed issues of rural development and rural performance in Ireland.

“Rural” is defined as District Electoral Divisions (DEDs) with no population centre above 1,500 people, with a population density below 150 per sq. km, and which are not part of an urban district or borough, ie it broadly refers to open countryside and rural villages.

2 Rural Area Typology

The first task was to develop a “typology”, ie a series of categories, of rural areas in Ireland. This was done using a process of statistical analysis which allows for systematic identification and grouping of DEDs with common socio-economic characteristics. The results are shown in Map 1.

MAP 1



A series of six distinct “rural area types” are identified. These cover all 2,716 rural DEDs, and all 1.4m people living in these (in 1996) – 39% of the national population. The remainder of Ireland is classified as urban.

Rural Area Type 1	Peri-urban Areas
No. DEDs 443 Population No. 408,876 % National Population 11.3	Rural areas close to the main urban centres, broadly corresponding to immediate urban areas of influence. High population density, relatively low reliance on farming, and high levels of commuting to work. The largest single Area Type in population terms.

Rural Area Type 2	Very Strong Areas
No. DEDs 628 Population No. 375,493 Population No. 375,493	Large areas of the country, mostly in the South and East, where farming continues to be strong. A relatively less “urbanised” population profile than Area 1, ie lower average education levels, lower female participation, and more manufacturing than services
Rural Area Type 3	Strong Adjusting (to output restrictions) Agricultural Areas
No. DEDs 612 Population No. 204,039 % National Population 5.6	DEDs throughout much of the East and South also with strong agriculture, but with a less advanced transition to non-agricultural activity. Areas are generally experiencing the challenge of adjusting to agricultural output restrictions.

Rural Area Type 4	Structurally Weak Areas
No. DEDs 644 Population No. 239,535 % National Population 6.6	A large number of DEDs involving disadvantaged rural areas, with high levels of dependence on directly subsidised agriculture (as opposed to price supports). Concentrated in the North West but also extends into parts of the North Midlands, the South and Mid West. Defining attributes are older farmers, small farms, declining farmer numbers, and a low level of non-manufacturing employment.
Rural Area Type 5	Marginal Areas
No. DEDs 201 Population No. 107,026 % National Population 3.0	These are more agriculturally disadvantaged than Type 4, and are clustered mainly in the most remote West and North West. While overall demographic viability is somewhat stronger than Type 4, perhaps due to a high incidence of part-time occupations, unemployment nevertheless remained high in 1996.

Rural Area Type 6	Highly Diversified Areas
No. DEDs 188 Population No. 91,378 % National Population 2.5	This type, involving a relatively small number of people, represents an almost “post-agricultural” rural economy. It involves areas of high natural amenity, which attracts high levels of tourism and recreational usage, and in some cases high levels of non-farming residents who have in-migrated. Areas involved include Connemara, Clare, Wicklow, and areas along the Shannon.

3 Outlook for Rural Areas

In relation to the outlook to 2020 for the labour force position of rural areas, agricultural employment and requirements for off-farm employment creation our main findings were:

- if recent population trends continue the labour force of rural areas is likely to decline by 11,500 or by 1.8% to around 627,000 in 2020;
- agricultural employment is estimated to decline by between 33,500 to 39,000 or by 30 - 35%. Across area types the rate of decline will range from around 23 - 27% for Area Types 1 and 2, to 40% and over for Area Types 4 and 5;
- depending on assumptions about future population trends the requirements for off-farm employment creation range from about 20,000 to 192,000 jobs. If all area types were to retain their present share of national population there would be considerable requirements for off-farm employment creation in Area Types 3, 4 and 5. However if recent population trends continue requirements for off-farm employment creation will be greatest for Area Types 1 and 2.

4 Urban-Rural Relationships

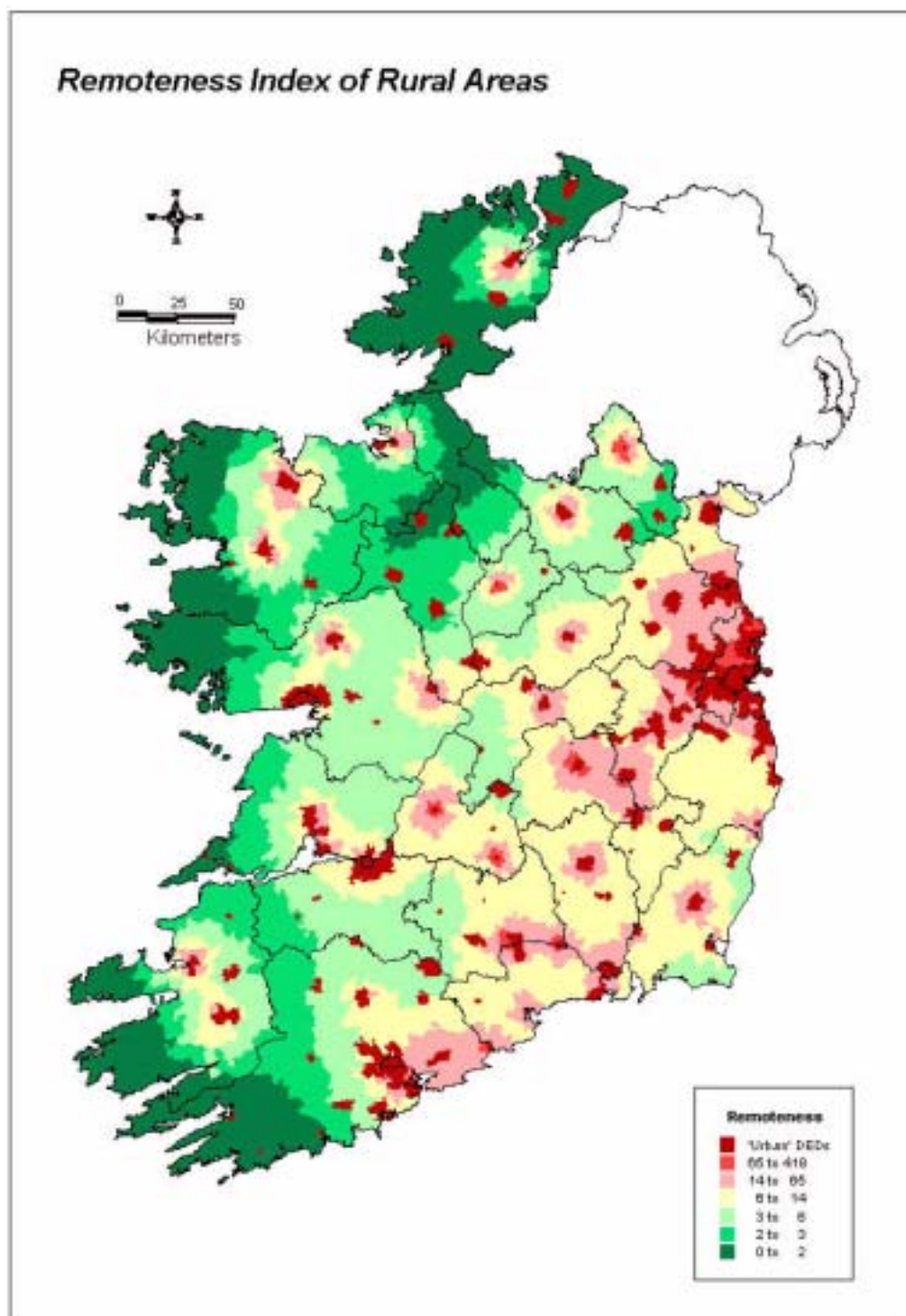
To explore the relationship between cities and towns and rural areas, rural DEDs were classified according to their degree of “remoteness”. This involved a composite scoring of each DED in terms of its distance from larger urban centres and the size of those centres (in population terms). The result is shown in Map 2. As shown, “remoteness” tends to increase as one moves westwards, with interspersed less remote “pockets” of DEDs around the cities and towns.

The remoteness of DEDs was compared to their economic performance, as measured by percentage employment growth 1991-96. This, of course, refers to employment of people resident in the location and not necessarily to employment located there. The main findings were:

- employment in rural areas grew at an average rate 1.7% each year over the 1991-96 period. However, the overall performance of rural DEDs varied, with one in five rural districts experiencing a decline in employment;
- the average employment growth rate of the three most remote groups (districts covered by one of the three shades of green in Map 2) was significantly lower than that of less remote groups (a difference of about one percentage point per annum);

- rural DEDs in the most remote group (the dark green areas in Map 2) on average performed better or at least as good as those in the 2nd and 3rd most remote groups (the light shades of green in Map 2). This may be due to a number of factors, such as the fact that we are dealing with growth rates rather than absolute changes or to some unique feature of these areas, eg tourism;
- differences in performance between the various groups in remoteness terms appears to be most pronounced for DEDs in the smallest population size category, ie the negative impact of remoteness comes into play most strongly in the case of rural areas which also have small populations. Remoteness and sparse populations are, of course, also themselves related to each other.

MAP 2



5 Rural Infrastructure

There is considerable evidence “on the ground” that much recent economic activity is related to the quality of infrastructure – and that the infrastructure of urban areas in terms of ports, airports, telecoms, energy, third level facilities etc helps explain the concentration of much economic activity to urban areas. The obvious corollary is that rural areas can be seen as infrastructurally and (as a result) economically “disadvantaged”.

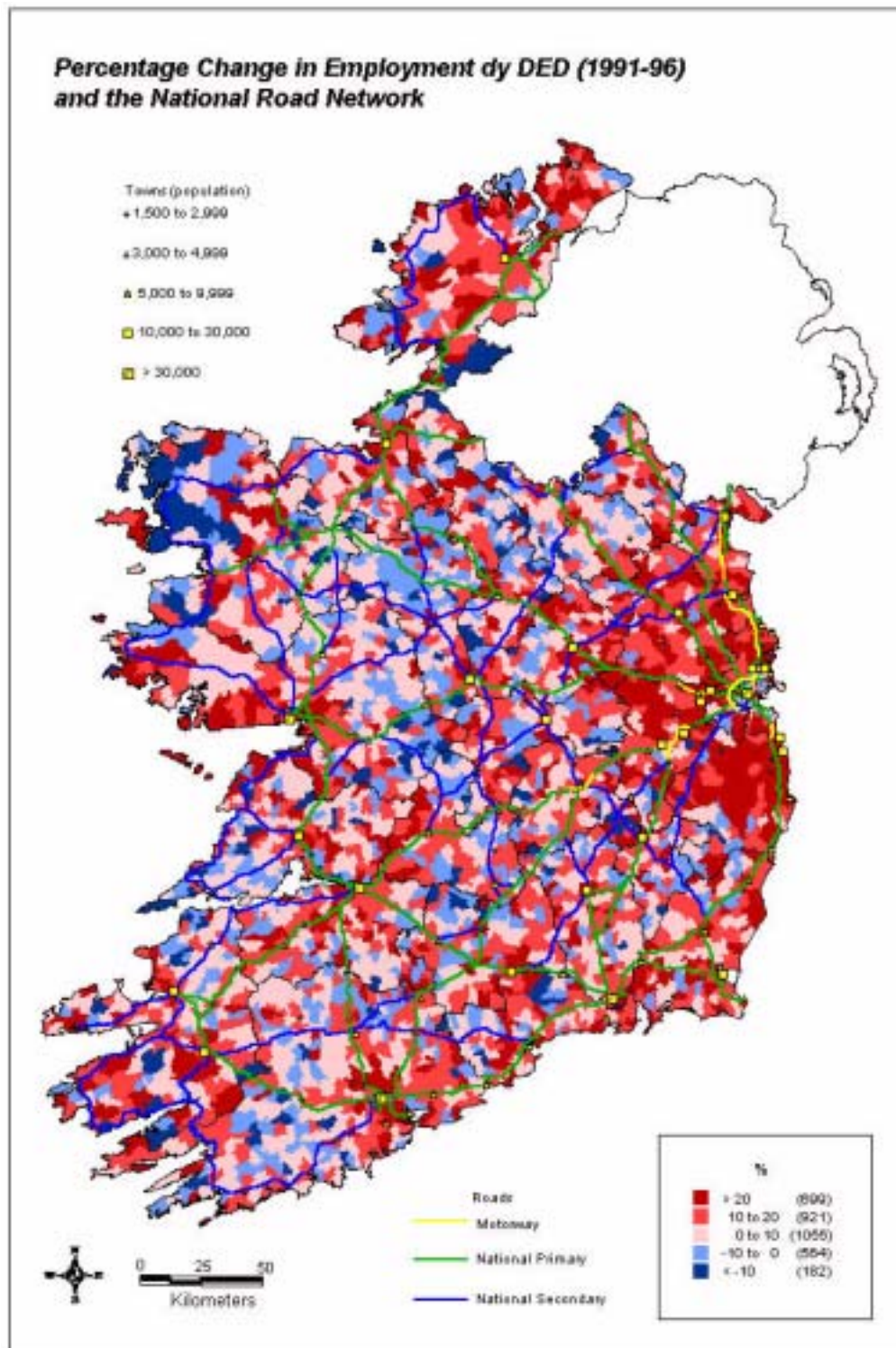
To explore this hypothesis, the percentage increase in the number at work who reside in each rural DED was compared with access to infrastructure, measured by DED proximity to the national primary road system. The results are shown in Map 3.

The most obvious pattern is once again the large concentration of well performing DEDs (those with positive employment growth) extending in a semi-circular fashion out from Dublin. This pattern mirrors the radial nature of the national road network which is centred on Dublin. Strong jobs growth is also seen to extend out along national routes around the larger towns and cities (Cork, Limerick, Galway, Athlone, Drogheda, Dundalk), which generally represent the convergence of a number of national routes. While it can be deduced from Map 3 that most growth over the 1991-96 period was urban concentrated, there are also therefore some indications that the spatial spread of this growth was facilitated by national roads extending in a radial manner out from the urban centres.

In order to examine this more closely, the rural areas were divided into four groups based on their distance from the nearest national road, ie the first “quartile” represents the 25% of rural areas furthest away from a national road network, and the fourth quartile contains the 25% of DEDs nearest a national road. The average annual employment growth rate for rural areas in this group was 2%. Rural areas furthest from the national road network had an average annual growth rate of 1.4%.

Caution must be exercised in interpreting these results, however, as the nature and direction of causality is difficult to establish. For example, as evidenced in Map 3, the national road network directly connects the large urban centres in the country. Rural areas that are closer to national roads will generally also be closer to urban centres, or will be positioned along corridors connecting urban centres. Furthermore, national primary roads tend to be better near to such centres.

MAP 3



6 Implications for Policy

Key policy implications arising from the rural typology are:

- the spatial structure of the Irish rural economy and society is complex and multi-layered. We have tried to reflect this in our typology. However, any typology necessarily involves some degree of simplification. In developing spatial strategies it is therefore important to recognise the underlying diversity and complexity of rural areas;
- the boundaries of the rural areas types do not correspond with established administrative boundaries, including regions, counties, and Gaeltacht Areas. It is therefore important to devise mechanisms that will on the one hand allow nuancing of policies within such administrative areas to reflect their diversity, and on the other facilitate co-ordination in policy across administrative boundaries;
- the existence of distinctive rural area types also suggests the need for customisation of “bundles of policies” to address area-specific issues;
- outside the relatively clearly delineated peri-urban areas (see Map 1, Type 1) any wider definition of spatial planning or functional areas as concentric circles drawn around towns must be treated with caution from a rural perspective. Such urban-defined areas are likely to encompass more than one rural area type;
- some rural areas that were previously regarded as strong on the basis of their agricultural profile may have recently entered a new phase in their development which will require considerable diversification over the medium term;
- some previously very weak rural areas have moved into a “post-agricultural” phase with new types of development associated with rural diversification in high amenity areas, involving high levels of tourism and leisure usage, and new resident inflows. The social and environmental consequences of these adjustments will require close attention.

A number of important issues with regard to off-farm employment requirements to 2020 are:

- the requirement to replace agricultural jobs is most critical in the first decade when growth of the labour force will be strongest (mainly through natural increase and migration rather than participation rates) and the decline of agricultural employment will be the greatest. Requirements are modest thereafter;
- if the population of rural areas continue on a similar growth (or decline) path to that experienced in the early 1990s, then the need for additional employment is relatively modest;

- however, if rural areas are to maintain their share of the State population (an unlikely scenario), then requirements are bigger and, predictably, more onerous on the relatively weaker rural areas.

With regard to the performance of rural areas and urban/rural relationships, a number of key issues emerge:

- the research shows that remote areas, especially ones with small populations, tend to perform economically relatively poorly. An exception is some high amenity areas which have diversified into a new tourism, amenity and residential role. The future of remote, often inland, areas with less natural attractions will present a particular challenge in the future;
- the relationship between employment growth and accessibility raises questions in relation to appropriate rural transport policies, both infrastructure and services, to complement the national roads strategy;
- policies to improve rural transport will need to be part of a co-ordinated policy framework which will also guide the provision of other support infrastructures;
- the environmental and sustainability aspects of spreading the benefits from urban centres into rural areas will require careful consideration. Rural growth based along national primary routes may not always be the most desirable spatial pattern of development. In many instances it may involve urban sprawl, inappropriate housing in rural areas, and increased car-based commuting;
- “semi-rural” towns in the 1,500-5,000 population category can play a very important role. They are in danger of “falling through the cracks” in any urban/rural analytical or policy split;
- the spatial implications of the vision for rural Ireland contained in the government’s White Paper on Rural Development will require detailed assessment in the light of the empirical findings presented here. As is true in relation to all areas of public policy, but perhaps even more so, clearly defined operational objectives will be a prerequisite to success in any spatial policy towards the complex system that is rural Ireland;
- relationships between rural and urban structures are not all “outward” from urban areas, as urban-focused analyses often presumes. In particular, it is likely that underperformance of certain towns reflects weakness and transition in the surrounding rural economies, notably in Area Type 3.

The analyses presented in this study are based on data for 1996. Clearly there have been very significant changes since then. Furthermore, the patterns of rural differentiation reflect the underlying structure and vibrancy of agriculture. However, the best available data for this sector relates to 1991, prior to the introduction of the 1992 CAP reforms. The analyses therefore need to be updated as soon as appropriate data becomes available from the 2000 Census of Agriculture and the 2001 Census of Population. Availability of comparable data for Northern Ireland will also make it possible to undertake an 'island wide' analysis of the spatial structure of rural areas in the future.