



Commission for
Rural Communities
Tackling rural disadvantage

**The place of 'rural'
within central,
regional and local
government**

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1. Introduction and context

We, the Commission for Rural Communities, have the following three main roles:

- Listening to and representing the views of rural communities
- Giving expert advice
- Acting as an independent watchdog.

We were set up in October 2006 under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006. Our job is to provide well-informed, independent advice to government and others to make sure that their policies reflect the real needs of people living and working in rural England.

We have prepared this paper of our views to help the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and others with an interest in rural issues, to think about how these can best be managed, nationally, regionally and locally, in the future.

Some of the evidence we gathered for this document came from our 'Benchmarking Regional Delivery' project, which we carried out to get feedback on progress made in meeting the commitments set out in the Government's Rural Strategy 2004. It has also been supported by the expertise and knowledge of our staff and commissioners.

Defra has recently been reviewing all its activities and policies. This includes the 'governance architecture' policy introduced by the Rural White Paper 2000, the Rural Strategy 2004, and the Modernising Rural Delivery (MRD) review 2003 – 2006. An important part of Defra's review has been looking at the experience of, and further prospects for rural proofing (taking rural needs and circumstances into account when developing policies and delivering programmes). They are also looking at the future prospects for mainstreaming (considering rural circumstances as part of everyday policy making, and not separately, throughout government).

This desire for rural policies to be considered as part of other government policies should also be reflected in a number of other reviews and agendas. These include the following.

- The focus on climate change and 'One Planet Living'
- The Third Sector Review (a joint review between the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury that aims to improve the relationship between the Government and voluntary and community organisations)
- The Local Government White Paper

This paper comments, on the way rural issues are managed at national, regional and local levels. In each section it offers suggestions under 'Looking to the future' boxes.

2. Reflections - the national level

a. Ministerial roles

In 2001, Defra was created and a 'Rural' Minister of State was appointed. After the Rural White Paper 2000, a Cabinet Sub Committee on rural policy was also set up, but this has since been wound down.

Looking to the future

Whether Defra remains responsible for 'rural affairs' or responsibility is moved to another government department is a matter for the Prime Minister to decide. There is a case for reviewing the role of the Rural Affairs Minister and developing and strengthening this role. It could be linked more closely to our work. There is also a case for a cabinet minister to stay involved with rural policy, which could be linked to the annual Rural Proofing report.

b. Natural England

The Rural Strategy 2004 and the NERC Act 2006 led to Natural England being created. It is a large national executive agency with regional and local offices. It combined all the functions of the former English Nature, the landscape, access and recreation elements of the former Countryside Agency, and the environmental land management functions of the Rural Development Service.

Setting up a single, independent, government organisation to be responsible for integrated resource management (co-ordinating the management of land, water and the environment), nature conservation, biodiversity (the range of species in an area), landscape, access and recreation has been broadly welcomed as a positive move

Looking to the future

Natural England is delivering services and environmental outcomes across rural England, but is also addressing urban and coastal issues. As a result, Natural England may provide valuable lessons for other organisations tackling issues that affect both rural and urban areas.

c. Rural proofing

Our role presents an important opportunity for the Government to demonstrate its continuing commitment to rural England.

We have been working with Defra to review and strengthen rural proofing relating to the Government's priorities of:

- tackling social exclusion (where people are prevented from taking advantage of what society has to offer, as a result of factors such as poverty, low employment, poor housing and so on);
- reforming public services;
- building on economic success; and
- the Government's 'One Planet Living' priority.

Our recent monitoring report on the Government's commitment to rural proofing (see www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk) demonstrated that the Government still has some way to go in making sure rural needs and circumstances are sufficiently taken into account. There is a level of commitment, but rural proofing is not routinely considered when policies are being developed.

It is important that mainstreaming rural issues does not replace the need for Defra to lead the way, within the Government, in rural proofing (or for us to continue to monitor and report on the extent to which government departments are rural proofing their policies).

We - and Defra - are also keen that this focus on mainstreaming does not cloud the purpose of rural proofing, which is to see improved outcomes for rural communities.

This includes a desire to develop effective rural proofing at regional and local levels, as well as in voluntary organisations and community groups and the private sectors, and in organisations responsible for monitoring government.

In 2005 the Government set up a high profile 'task and finish' review, the Affordable Rural Housing Commission. This successful model could be used more in the future. Government departments could certainly give us separately funded, specific pieces of work, to take a lead on developing solutions to particular issues relating to rural policies.

There is also a case for the Environment Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee to carry out monitoring relating to rural proofing, including formally receiving our annual rural proofing report.

Looking to the future

We believe the process of rural-proofing needs to be strengthened, including through:

- the reformed Regulatory Impact Assessment process;
- reviewing rural-proofing carried out by parliament;
- occasional separate reviews (such as that on housing outlined above);
- Public Service Agreements and other targets;
- training and development; and
- secondment and learning opportunities.

d. Rural Services Standard

In 2005, Defra evaluated the national Rural Services Standard introduced by the Rural White Paper 2000. Some of its limitations have been recorded, most recently by us (see www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk).

Looking to the future

A strategy for the future of the Rural Services Standard would be of value, and this may come from Defra's strategy review or possibly from the 'Rural Services' study we are going to carry out. We will certainly be considering how a national Rural Service Standard will continue to be relevant alongside the growing trend for powers to be transferred to regional and local government.

e. Rural Affairs Forum for England

The Rural Affairs Forum for England (RAFE) and the regional Rural Affairs Forums were set up under the Rural White Paper 2000. The RAFE was wound down as part of Rural Strategy 2004. Greater emphasis was then given to the role of the Regional Rural Affairs Forums (RRAFs). There is certainly a case for continued attention and support to the work of the RRAFs.

Looking to the future

RRAFs could continue to be supported in various ways. For example, Defra could make us responsible for working with and developing the role of these forums, and helping to draw their views together, perhaps through an annual meeting of our commissioners and RRAF chairs and the Secretary of State.

Defra needs to make clear its future ambitions for the role and development of the forums.

f. Rural networks and groups

The Central Local Partnership's rural subgroup (see www.lga.gov.uk/Executives.asp?lsection=758&ccat=70) between central and local government, was set up under the Rural White Paper 2000. It continues to meet occasionally. There are also a wide range of other networks and groups that were created around the same time as the Rural White Paper 2000. These include:

- the Institute of Rural Health;

- the Market Towns Advisory Forum;
- the Rural Stress Information Network; and
- the Parish and Town Councils Development Group.

Looking to the future

Membership of the CLP rural subgroup should be reviewed. The County Councils Network and SPARSE (a group of the most rural local authorities in England) should be considered for membership alongside the Local Government Association and the National Association of Local Councils. The subgroup could be renewed to help the Government raise rural issues and challenges with local government, and vice versa.

The range of other rural networks and groups should also be reviewed and evaluated.

g. Definition of rural

One important piece of the national approach to rural issues is the definition of rural agreed by the Office of National Statistics in 2004 (see www.defra.gov.uk/rural/ruralstats/rural-definition.htm). The National Statistician and the Rural Affairs Minister recently wrote to government departments urging them to make greater use of the definition.

Looking to the future

There is a need for this definition to continue to be promoted and used (for example, when assessing performance against PSA targets and Local Area Agreements).

h. Conclusions

When the Rural White Paper was introduced in 2000, a lot of the ways rural issues would be tackled nationally, as discussed above, were widely welcomed. Some of the approaches have worked well, and some less so. Defra should now listen to the views

of rural interest groups as it reviews and refreshes its rural responsibilities in 2007 and beyond.

3. Reflections - the regional level

a. Regional Development Agencies

As part of the Rural Strategy 2004, Defra transferred the delivery of its responsibility to improve the availability of services in rural communities to Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). Many of the indicators used to measure progress in this matter are outside RDAs' control.

Also, the 'Tasking Framework' (the tool the Department of Trade and Industry uses to measure the performance of RDAs), emphasises the need to specify *quantities*. This creates two problems. Firstly, RDAs have difficulty quantifying social improvements brought about through their work. Secondly, social improvements are less important to RDAs, as the performance of RDAs is measured in more economic terms.

Looking ahead, the RDAs face an important challenge in making sure the EU funded Rural Development Programme for England (2007 – 2013) is delivered in ways that result in improvements for rural people and rural economies, and that also join up with existing national, regional and local plans. They will also need to have a clear view about the economic issues within their rural areas. For example, this will need to include a view about the place of 'rural' within city regions and also the place of 'rural' in remoter areas, beyond city regions. It will also need to address the role of market towns within rural economies. RDAs will need to have a clear view about how developing structures for training and for investment meet rural economic needs. Other more local issues will need to be addressed, including the role migrant workers play in contributing to local rural economies.

Looking to the future

For RDAs, Public Service Agreement targets do not always result in real social improvements in rural communities. This should be reviewed. Arguably, each PSA target should deal with only one issue rather than covering several issues.

Some RDAs have developed 'Access to Services' programmes, in partnership with local authorities and rural community councils. These programmes appear to have a lot of local support. But there are questions about the extent to which RDAs and the Department of Transport (and other relevant government departments) are working together to make a success of the programmes.

Looking to the future

Solutions to the problem of access to services in rural communities need to be considered by central government departments as well as RDAs to be successful.

People in rural communities feel uncomfortable when resources for rural areas are not clearly identified within RDA programmes. As rural programmes increasingly form part of general community regeneration initiatives, there is a danger that rural communities will become frustrated by what they consider to be a lack of funding for rural initiatives.

This can be tackled by the lead rural board member within each RDA making sure systems are in place to monitor and assess the funding going to rural areas.

Looking to the future

To produce PSA targets that can be met in rural areas, Defra should make sure they work with other government departments when PSA targets are developed.

In future, PSAs should set out ways to measure rural progress and performance.

RDAs need to tell rural communities how their planning, funding and achievements are being delivered in rural areas as much as elsewhere.

b. Government Offices

The role Government Offices will play in rural issues in the future may have a greater focus on co-ordinating, influencing and championing rural issues across other regional organisations.

The Rural Strategy 2004 led to the development of Rural Priorities Boards, chaired by the Government Offices. These Boards were recommended by the Modernising Rural Delivery review. In practice, this recommendation has been interpreted in different ways. There are now key 'rural delivery groups' within every region (except London). The difference between 'Rural Priority Boards' and the rural delivery groups that now exist is the extent to which resources are 'directed'. The role of these rural delivery groups, even at a more senior level, is advisory not executive. How the groups will develop in the future is not clear.

One of the main tasks these groups perform has been developing Regional Rural Delivery Frameworks (see www.defra.gov.uk/rural/default.htm). These frameworks are designed to bring together regional and local partners to agree what their priorities should be and how they can work together to deliver them. They should provide a strong way of rural proofing regional and sub regional plans, including the way the new Rural Development Programme for England (funded by the European Union) is delivered within each region.

Some regions have viewed this whole exercise very positively; arguing that the process of preparing their Regional Rural Delivery Framework (RRDF) has challenged cultures, built trust and understanding and also improved the statistical evidence used by government bodies within the region.

It is not yet clear whether this whole RRDF process has resulted in improvements that justify the costs involved. Also, a common concern of many rural communities is that Defra is losing interest in the future of RRDFs.

The future of RRDFs increasingly appears to be in the hands of individual regions. The future options could include RRDFs:

- being incorporated into other regional plans (notably the Regional Economic Strategies) in the future;
- continuing on their own, setting targets for reporting; or
- being scrapped altogether.

It will be important for each region to think through the most appropriate future for their RRDF and for Defra to provide some guidance.

Looking to the future

The future role of regional rural groups led by Government Offices needs to be reviewed. There may well be a need to give these groups a new direction in line with the desire for rural policies to be considered alongside other policies.

Defra should provide guidance on the future of RRDFs.

c. Regional Rural Affairs Forums (RRAFs)

These forums were set up under the Rural White Paper 2000. The eight forums - one in each English region except London - were created as 'a primary means by which grassroots customers of government services could give direct feedback to government ... to ensure that those services meet the needs of rural people and that they actually deliver practical benefits on the ground'. (See www.defra.gov.uk/rural/voice/regional.htm).

They became more significant when the Rural Affairs Forum for England was wound up in 2004. As a result of this, most regions have altered their RRAF over the last two years. This has partly been to help make sure that forum members represent a range of interests in rural communities.

The revised RRAFs are starting to play a valuable role relating to regional government. In general there are good relationships between the RRAFs and

Government Offices but there are also some potential tensions. RRAFs should be independent of government, yet they are managed and supported by the Government Office. Although this is not a problem at the moment, in the future RRAFs may need to be more independent. A relationship with the Regional Assemblies may help with this.

Looking to the future

RRAFs will need to play an increasing role in driving forward rural issues at the regional level.

RRAFs could develop a role in monitoring the success of, and outcomes achieved as a result of RRDFs. They should be able to hold regional organisations to account when progress is not satisfactory.

To be more accountable, RRAFs need to consider having stronger relationships with elected groups (notably the Regional Assemblies), with local authorities, and with MPs and MEPs.

Defra needs to make clear its future ambitions for the role and development of the RRAFs.

d. Regional Assemblies

All Regional Assemblies made up mostly of elected councillors perform the same four activities (see www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1109130):

- Preparing Regional Spatial Strategies (including Regional Transport Strategies)
- Taking an overview of the housing markets in their regions, producing regional housing strategies, and advising ministers on distributing resources to support the supply of affordable housing
- Representing their region's communities to Whitehall and European institutions
- Monitoring the work of RDAs, including being closely involved in developing regional economic strategies.

Most Regional Housing Strategies appear to be paying more attention than before to affordable housing issues in rural areas. However, many rural communities are concerned that the problems of affordable rural housing have got worse over the last few years. The important role Regional Spatial Strategies will play in the future development and wellbeing of rural areas is also well recognised.

Looking to the future

It is critical that the Regional Assemblies work closely with the RRAFs and others to make sure their activities support each other and lead to improved planning and outcomes for rural communities.

4. Reflections - the local level

a. Local authorities

Many rural communities feel that the Rural Strategy 2004 didn't deal effectively in involving local authorities in tackling rural issues. The developing experience of LAAs and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) as well as the ambitions set out in the Government's recent Local Government White Paper reinforce this opinion.

Currently, a number of local authority representatives are also active within their RRAFs. But not all local authorities can be represented on RRAFs. There may also be issues about how local authority representatives on RRAFs can effectively give feedback to all local authorities (with rural communities) within the region.

Although local authorities play a major role in the context of LAAs and LSPs, some rural communities are concerned about a lack of references to rural issues within these structures.

Looking to the future

Local authorities and councillors serving rural communities should 'rural proof' their LAAs, strategies, LSPs and other relevant plans.

The measures the Local Government White Paper suggests for setting up a new comprehensive area assessment performance framework may also provide an extra opportunity to look at rural needs within local authority areas.

Defra, and others, may want to review the need to provide support and advice to maintain this approach to rural proofing in the future.

b. Rural Pathfinders

Defra has worked with local government over the last two years to design and deliver a programme of eight Rural Delivery Pathfinders (see www.defra.gov.uk/rural/ruraldelivery/pathfinders/default.htm).

These Pathfinders were set up under by the Rural Strategy 2004. They are local partnerships, led by local authorities, that are designed to pilot new approaches to meeting rural policies, tackling social exclusion, and tackling social, economic and environmental issues. They were also designed to investigate how to:

- improve co-ordination of rural solutions at local levels;
- get more value out of the wide range of funding available; and
- have strong local leadership to tackle disadvantages in rural communities.

Evidence shows that in some regions, Pathfinders got extra funding from the RDAs. Other Pathfinders received little or no other extra funding. Not surprisingly, this appears to have made a big difference in terms of how effective they are seen to be. Although our research did not identify reasons for this extra investment, it is likely that the Pathfinders that did get extra funding did so because they could show how they would make a significant contribution towards delivering the Regional Economic Strategy and the Defra Public Service Agreement. Also, across all regions, organisations' willingness to get involved in Pathfinder activities appears to have been very mixed. Some Pathfinders have really struggled to involve organisations that did not consider rural issues to be a priority.

As this programme draws to an end, there is a strong case for Pathfinders 'mainstreaming' (transferring ways of working) their activities into the LAAs.

The evaluation of the programme, led by the National Audit Office, will be an important source of advice on how this can most successfully be achieved.

Looking to the future

Defra is now responsible for working closely with local government to make sure the lessons learnt from these Pathfinder areas are properly gathered, evaluated and fed into the mainstreaming process across local government.

There may be a case for further Pathfinder approaches on different rural policies in the future.

c. Rural Community Councils (RCCs)

In 2005, Defra consulted on and started a £13.5 million Rural Social and Community programme for a two-year period (see www.defra.gov.uk/rural/communities/funding-opportunities.htm). This programme was designed to streamline the social and community programmes of the former Countryside Agency and Defra and to allow greater local flexibility in the way Defra funds were used to support rural communities. The largest share of the programme (approximately £9 million a year) is for sub regional activities, designed and delivered in partnership with other organisations. Around £3.5 million a year is set aside for services provided under Defra's agreement with the network of RCCs.

Business plans for each of the 47 sub regional partnerships have been put in place. Most of the business plans included activities that followed on from previously separate sources of funding for rural housing enablers (staff who work with communities in rural areas to identify housing needs), community development workers and parish and community planning. They also included some good examples of new projects on matters such as migrant workers being integrated into rural communities, tackling inequalities in people's health through providing food from local sources, targeting opportunities for providing learning and skills, and supporting social enterprise.

It was agreed that funding for this programme should be included in the list of funding sources that could be pooled for an LAA.

The funding for the programme includes support for the RCCs through three-year funding agreements. This funding focuses on support for:

- influencing at regional and local level on behalf of rural communities; and
- developing the ability of staff and important organisations such as the County Associations of Local Councils.

Defra also recognised that a number of national bodies have a strong track record and specialist skills in developing ways of increasing communities' capabilities in helping communities to plan for and achieve their local goals. To do this, they entered into an agreement with Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) to strengthen RCCs' abilities. They also continued to make funding available to the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and the Society of Local Council Clerks, to help parish councils with their work.

Looking to the future

Defra is now responsible for working closely with ACRE, NALC, the Society of Local Council Clerks and the RCCs and other relevant organisations to make sure the value of the Rural Social and Community Programme is evaluated.

Defra will need to consult these organisations on the future of the programme – whether this is a continuing programme (reviewed and changed in light of evaluations) or whether it is incorporated into other funding processes (and if so how the focus on rural issues will be maintained and monitored in the future). The results of the Government's Third Sector review should also influence these decisions.

5. Conclusion

We hope this paper will be a useful contribution to Defra's thinking as it deals with the future place of 'rural' within Government and within policies. We hope that it is also of value to other government departments and other national organisations.

Likewise, we hope this paper is helpful to Regional Rural Affairs Forums, local authorities, rural community councils, and other regional and local organisations as they deal with these challenging questions and issues.

We would be happy to receive views and feedback on this document and the ideas in it. We would also be happy to develop and discuss this document with relevant organisations and those in central, regional and local government.

Learning lessons from previous rural policies and processes is an important opportunity to make the future work better than the past, and to really improve the lives of rural people.

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