

The potential of England's rural economy – response from Cllr Jane Carson

Many thanks for sending me a copy of the Committee's report on 'The potential of England's rural economy' together with the Government's response to the report.

I would like to reinforce the Committee's concern that Defra's new rural affairs objective does not adequately address the issues of transport, communications, planning and further education. In its response (para 11), the Government states that its Departmental Strategic Objective highlights two particular areas for specific focus: economic productivity and affordable housing.

Economic productivity is dependent on having the correct infrastructure in place i.e. good transport, fast and efficient communications, supportive planning processes, and high quality readily accessible further education. Infrastructure is not something that can be accomplished by the individual; in our complex modern world, it must be put in place, or at least facilitated, by Government.

Let me give you two examples from this area, where I believe the Government is failing to support its rural populations:

Communications

The communication infrastructure is lagging behind that of large urban areas. Many of the companies based in this rural area are heavily dependent on fast, reliable communications, yet broadband connections are not complete and sometimes fail to reach minimal broadband standards because of lack of investment in the cabling infrastructure. Mobile phone usage is patchy and unreliable due to lack of masts.

Transport

We are still battling to overcome the problems associated with public transport, particularly for the young who often find their participation in education and recreational activities limited by lack of transport. Roads in rural areas are no longer safe routes for walking and cycling in the way they once were. This is partly due to volume and speed of traffic, but also because not enough thought and action has gone into improving the infrastructure for those on foot or bicycle, e.g. when a trunk road is upgraded or dualled, do we make provision for walkers? No, yet often that trunk road was, and still is, the direct route for getting from A to B.

I am aware that the Department of Transport is in the process of consulting on provision of private hire vehicles to run as bus services, and this may well prove to be the answer to bus service provision in rural areas. I hope that this is getting full support from Defra.

The other area of focus for the DSO, that of affordable housing, is closely interlinked with economic productivity/prosperity. If the first can be achieved, then obviously housing becomes more 'affordable' for the local population. That said, this particular

area does have the problems associated with the seasonal nature of the tourist industry, and problems in house pricing related to the influx of older people choosing to retire here from large cities.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee of South Lakeland District Council has a task group reviewing the rural proofing strategy, and is due to give its final report to the committee in March, I will ensure that a copy is sent to you at this time.

Cllr Jane Carson (Mid Furness ward, South Lakeland District Council)

February 2009

The potential of England's rural economy – response from Lancashire Rural Delivery Pathfinder

The Lancashire Rural Delivery Pathfinder reported back to DEFRA in the Spring of 2007. The main findings of our work detailed in our 'Outcome Manifesto' contributed to the National report 'Rural Challenges, Local Solutions' launched in February 2008. Many of the issues we identified within our work continue to be discussed and worked on as they are 'knotty' problems which will take some unravelling. We continue to work with DEFRA and as the Government's response identifies Lancashire is one of the Pathfinders to have received funding to further disseminate Pathfinder learning. We have indicated to DEFRA that we would be interested in becoming involved in the DEFRA/Local Government Rural Policy Group as one of our key outcomes was 'mainstreaming' rural needs and interests.

This 'mainstreaming' agenda gives the context for the following comments, drawn from our Pathfinder work, on the Government's response to the EFRA Committee report;

Our view is that Government policy on the drive to both establish and maintain sustainable communities should be applied across all communities despite their location using the principles developed by the Egan Review. As all communities are different and at different points within a sustainability dynamic interventions will have to be tailored to address an individual community's issues, needs and opportunities. A community located within a rural area may face challenges in terms of local employment opportunity and local access to services but these are not uniquely rural in nature, and again tailored local solutions need to be sought. The starting point for this debate should not be that somehow the principles of sustainable community development in rural areas are different from communities elsewhere (Reflecting Introduction point 3 of the Government's response).

Following from this point our view is that at the local level 'rural proofing' is more appropriately replaced by a concept of 'community proofing'. This is not to deny that there needs to be a continued check on the 'fairness' of policy directives and service provision for rural communities. At the local level the Comprehensive Area Assessment and in particular the New Place Survey should be used to gather data which will enable the identification of any patterns of unaddressed rural disadvantage. At the national level there is a continued need for 'rural proofing' to identify any underlying disadvantage for rural communities in terms of policy development and implementation and to make that case for changes as appropriate.

Our view is that the Committee have raised the correct issue with Government in terms of IO No. 2: rural economic growth. From our observations there appears to be a 'two-speed' rural economy emerging which is significantly influenced by proximity to urban centres. As the Government response identifies remote rural areas present the greatest rural economic challenge. From the Lancashire perspective we would

agree with this comment. Our view however is that the fundamental problem facing remote rural areas is poor transport infrastructure, road or rail, with improved connectivity needed as an impetus for economic growth. Raising the economic potential and therefore the sustainability of communities within remote rural areas therefore is clearly not just an issue for DEFRA but requires coordinated Departmental action. We agree that accessible rural areas, in particular, are performing strongly in terms of economic growth and present the greatest economic opportunity within rural areas. Our contention is that the generalised application of rural policy, particularly planning policy, is placing a constraint on the economic potential of accessible rural areas which restricts the development of sustainable communities here and is not realising the potential contribution which could be made to the national economy. We therefore support the Committee's view that DEFRA should have a broader view of economic growth across all rural areas and should consider how best to optimise the economic potential of accessible rural areas.

Andy Ashcroft

Chair, Lancashire Rural Delivery Pathfinder Task Group

January 2009

The potential of England's rural economy – response from Peel Holroyd

Thank you for sending me a copy and I note you invite comments.

May I please add to the current debate in the form, that I suppose the truly valid question at any moment of time is whether it is possible for every citizen, household, centres of employment et al, to be fully informed of the minute personal everyday impact of such learned considerations and recommendations?

The infra-structure of such communication logistics is essential to developing the rural economy of England, as of course it is to the urban areas, but the land based industries have to recognise and manage the impact of the natural seasons throughout the year to be viable!

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate.

Peel Holroyd

January 2009

The potential of England's rural economy – response from Regional Rural Affairs Fora

Commentary to the Government response to the EFRA Committee Report

The Chairs of seven of the eight Regional Rural Affairs Fora submitted evidence to the EFRA Select Committee inquiry into 'The potential of England's rural economy'. They are pleased to offer the Committee a brief commentary to the Department's response to the Committee Report.

The commentary does not seek to comment 'blow by blow' on the Department's response. It is DEFRA's overall strategy and approach to achieving strong rural communities that is at issue and this commentary restricts itself to five specific points in this regard.

1. DEFRA have reiterated their case for monitoring the DSO by means of both existing and new data sets focused on a relatively narrow set of indicators. These indicators present an unrealistically rosy picture of rural areas. We have heard too often locally that, because urban areas give a greater return on investment, overall numerical targets can be met without doing anything to address needs in rural areas. The approach DEFRA is taking, therefore, is weak, high risk for rural communities and disconnected from how priorities are informed at a local or regional level. DEFRA does not seem to have recognised that its ability to influence emerging decision making structures at regional and local level is very limited when it comes to community and economic objectives. It does not seem to understand the fundamental change that is needed if it is to ensure that rural areas are properly served by mainstream services at these levels.

DEFRA should take a lead within Government to revisit the definition of National Indicators that are being used to set many public sector priorities at local level and include within them a means by which delivery in rural areas will be monitored. DEFRA will then have to ensure that delivery of Local Area Agreements is monitored both in concentrated and dispersed areas of need, and this will have to form part of any assessment of their success.

2. DEFRA's response has not looked in detail at the way in which the Index of Multiple Deprivation distorts any assessment of community need solely towards areas where it is most concentrated. DEFRA should have as a central objective leavening the way in which the IMD is used within Government. They should aim for the IMD not to be used on its own but in tandem with information about actual numbers of people and families who are disadvantaged, especially across large dispersed areas of

population. This will put a more correct emphasis on numbers of disadvantaged people rather than ranking of locations where they are concentrated. This is especially important when the index is used to making decisions on allocation of resources. As the recession bites people from all communities will be affected and this will become ever more essential.

DEFRA and the CRC's role should then be to monitor the effectiveness of this approach and influence government departments accordingly. Defra would do well to coordinate this activity through Regional Observatories and link it directly with the emerging evidence base for the Integrated Regional Strategies.

3. DEFRA have not responded in detail over the mechanisms by which local decisions and local services are delivered and we suspect that this is because they do not have the capacity to engage with, or fully understand these. Recent legislation has placed an obligation on public sector agencies to co-operate together on County wide strategies for service delivery (Local Area Agreements). For rural Counties DEFRA must seek to negotiate with the rest of Whitehall an arrangement by which this can be more comprehensively 'rural proofed'.

DEFRA should seek an obligation on public service providers to identify ways in which jointly delivering services in rural areas can both maintain and improve local access and help to retain and develop local community infrastructure and assets. We would commend DEFRA becoming more involved with the Audit Commission and the process of Comprehensive Area Assessment as a means of ensuring this dimension of rural delivery is properly addressed in all rural Counties. This is an area of work where DEFRA and the RRAFs should make maximum use of collaboration with the Government Offices of the Regions.

4. The timing and administrative arrangements for rounds of Comprehensive Spending Review, and the attendant changes to government machinery, is not an issue for us. The outcome for rural areas, however, does concern us and should be one of the goals for DEFRA. DEFRA seem to believe that rural proofing is being taken up across other Whitehall departments and in the regions despite the clear evidence to the contrary in the recent Rural Proofing Reports from the CRC. Government should immediately make this an enforced obligation across all relevant departments of government. To do this it will have to strengthen the lead role of both DEFRA and the Commission for Rural Communities and ensure greater co-operation by other departments by giving the DSO the greater strength of a PSA.

If it is not possible to make this change between rounds of CSR, DEFRA must place the highest priority on making a good start in negotiations to achieve this, and the resources needed to implement it, in the next CSR.

5. DEFRA's approach to assessing the strength of rural communities and the conclusions that it reaches would not be recognised by the many of those communities who are experiencing an ebbing away of investment and services. DEFRA should seek an agreement with CLG and DBERR that where planning and economic policy impacts on rural areas the first criteria for deciding where housing and economic development will take place will be the contribution that it will make to retaining viability of local services and infrastructure. This should be a central plank of planning policy both now and in future regional planning and economic policy, as well as in all rural Local Development Frameworks. As a result there should be a presumption in favour of incremental investment in the current public service infrastructure and settlement pattern, not the enforced creation of new ones.

Jeremy Leggett, for the RRAF Chairs

February 2009