Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee
Rural Communities Order: a briefing paper

May 2012

Background
The Government has published an Order in Parliament to abolish the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), with effect from 31 March 2013. The Order is now subject to scrutiny by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Select Committee in the House of Commons, and the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee in the House of Lords. The Government has added capacity within Defra by establishing the Rural Communities Policy Unit, aiming to promote the interest of rural communities and businesses.

Timing
The Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee is due to debate the Order to abolish the CRC on Tuesday 29 May.

The Commission for Rural Communities
Since 2005, CRC has fulfilled its statutory roles of advice, advocacy and watchdog, acting as an independent voice to Ministers on issues relating to disadvantage in rural areas. It has made a number of notable differences to the policies of Government and other public bodies on the back of a wealth of intelligence gathered in that time.

Some of the CRC’s achievements have included:

- Publication of our Higher Ground report. As a consequence, government conducted an uplands policy review and the Efra Select Committee also published a Farming in the Uplands report which the government also responded to. Key tangible changes which followed include the creation of an uplands funding theme within the Rural Development Programme for England

- Championing across Government the need for digital access in rural areas. This has been reflected in the Government’s commitment to extending broadband across the country, and the recent announcement by Ofcom that it will insist that broadband access becomes less expensive in rural areas.

- Highlighting the extent to which people in rural areas have always taken more control of the services they require, often devising ways of ensuring that the interests of people in difficult
circumstances are looked after by the community. Our work has clear resonance in Government thinking around a more active community and voluntary sector.

The benefits of an independent rural voice
The loss of an independent rural voice may have the consequence that the Government does not have sufficient engagement on matters relating to disadvantaged rural communities. The newly established Rural and Farming Networks (RFNs) are expected to prioritise the interests of rural communities as well as the other environmental or business interests. The Government’s intention is that RFNs look at a broad range of rural issues, so there is a danger that the interests of more vulnerable rural communities are lost amongst a range of other priorities.

Traditional statistical sources such as the Indices of Deprivation tend to show that deprivation is not a significant issue for the 9.8 million (19%) people who live in rural England. That is because such statistics operate at the level of the Lower Super Output Area (LSOA), typically containing some 1500 residents. This can sometimes result in the issues facing smaller communities within substantial and diverse geographical rural areas not being addressed in policy thinking. An independent voice is perhaps more likely to highlight such discrepancies.

The CRC has unfailingly put its research into the public domain and has raised issues that are uncomfortable for the Government, as well as being supportive when it believed Government were making decisions in the interests of rural communities. For example, CRC’s well-evidenced recommendation to select committee inquiries on the post office closure programme and the future of the post office network secured a presumption against closing any post office which hosts the last remaining shop in a community.

A streamlined CRC can continue to offer a voice for rural communities in Government
Government could give serious consideration to the importance of interpreting evidence relating to rural communities objectively and independently with a streamlined, more focused CRC. Whilst we accept that the Commission’s advisory and advocacy functions have been integrated into Defra we believe that there continues to be a role for a small, independent body to provide an objective ‘watchdog’ view of developing policy relating to rural communities across Government, to scan the horizon for new issues as they emerge, and to make recommendations. The Government clearly understands this, as the 2011 consultation document on the future of CRC welcomed the intention of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee to carry out a scrutiny exercise of the work of the RCPU. However this will not be an on-going piece of work for the Select Committee. One approach might be for the Government to continue the CRC function, reporting directly to Defra Ministers (or possibly another Department with a cross-Whitehall focus), to provide an independent view and to be a critical friend. The purposes of such a function could include:

- Scanning the horizon for issues which might affect rural communities disproportionately, and how they are changing - an issue that CRC has recently identified, for example, is the differences between rural and urban local authorities in the available budget for adult social care;

- Taking external soundings from independent experts (academics, business people, those with a clear understanding of the public sector);

- Taking an overview of the work programmes of all Government Departments, and asking
for explanations of how they affect rural communities, and how they relate to each other; and

- Making publicly-known recommendations to Ministers.

Using the current funding model for the CRC as a benchmark, we believe that such a function could operate for around £350,000 a year - a 14% saving on the CRC’s 2012-13 budget. That would provide for a focused work programme concentrating on key priorities facing rural communities. A focused, streamlined CRC could access external expertise and advice as necessary and, importantly, being external to Government it could enable different perspectives to be brought into the open, including from differing parts of the country. That is harder to replicate within government.

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