

**Devon Rural Network Seminar**  
Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> July, Larkbeare House, Exeter

**Rural Proofing: A Renewed Focus**

**Welcome and Scene Setting**

Rev. Philip Wagstaff welcomed delegates to the seminar, as Chair of DRN, giving a brief overview of the intentions for the day and a quick background to the Devon Rural Network.

**Rural Proofing – Government Overview**

**Tony Williamson – Head of Rural Mainstreaming Policy, Defra**

Tony gave an introduction to rural proofing procedures used in central Government, and the responsibility for all departments to undertake rural proofing when creating new policies and strategies.

As well as the issues raised through a PowerPoint presentation (slides below), Tony also made a number of key points:

- There was a strong opportunity for Ministers to make themselves known that needed to be utilised.
- There were two strands to rural proofing – as a tool for policy makers rather than rural networks and rural affairs forums to undertake; and as a process for local influence and engagement.
- The various definitions of rural proofing needed to be consolidated to provide one clear definition.
- Rural proofing should provide solutions to meet rural needs.
- Rural proofing must be undertaken early on in policy formation.
- A series of short term secondments were being organised for CRC staff to act as consultants to Whitehall Departments on rural proofing.
- Follow up events from the rural proofing toolkit launch in May 2009 were being organised, focusing on the regional Rural Affairs Forums and providing a regional and local focus.
- There had been a suggestion for the creation of a network of Local Authority experts to discuss rural proofing at the local level.

At the close of the presentation, members of the audience raised some additional points to consider:

- Was there a link to equality strands – could rural issues be included as part of the standard checklists? There was a danger that rural could be generalised or labelled as disadvantaged – rural needs needed treatment but not special treatment.
- There needed to be greater consideration of rural in terms of land mass or percentage of population. Rural areas covered 70-80% of the land mass in the UK and 20% of the population. Which definition is used could have a very different outcome in terms of development and policy.
- A clear definition of rural was needed.
- The use of 'rural' as a noun was questioned – it is an adjective!

## Rural Policy

- The task of establishing and sustaining strong rural communities is the responsibility of everyone in Government (national, regional and local) and not just Defra.
- Defra uses its relatively limited rural policy resources in 4 main ways:
  - To be the rural champion within Whitehall, and with government more widely, in order to promote the representation of rural interests in mainstream policy-making and delivery;
  - To maintain strong links with organisations representing rural communities to make sure they have a voice that is heard by national Government;
  - To improve the evidence base in terms of data collected and made available to other government departments to help them better understand the rural context for their policies; and
  - To sponsor the Commission for Rural Communities to act as a rural adviser, advocate and watchdog.

## Rural Mainstreaming

- Rural mainstreaming is not new. It has always been the responsibility of all parts of Government to ensure that the needs of all sections of society, including rural areas, are appropriately addressed in policy-making and delivery.
- The Government remains committed to this, and Hilary Benn's 5 February speech indicated a renewed emphasis on ensuring that all national, regional and local policies and programmes, including those designed to address the impacts of the recession, benefit rural as well as urban people, businesses and communities.
- Rural proofing is a policy tool, introduced through the Rural White Paper in 2000, used to ensure that the principle of rural mainstreaming is delivered.
- It requires policy makers to: consider whether their policy is likely to have a different impact in rural areas, because of particular rural circumstances or needs; make a proper assessment of those impacts, if they are likely to be significant; and adjust the policy, where appropriate, with solutions to meet rural needs and circumstances.

## So What Are We Doing?

□ Defra and CRC officials are currently working together on a significant joint project to clarify and develop further understanding of mainstreaming and rural proofing across Government.

□ This project will be addressing the issue at national, regional and local levels, through work with Whitehall departments, with Government Offices and RDAs, and with local authorities.

□ This project will embrace a wide range of existing and planned work, and build on the keynote speech by Huw Irranca-Davies at a CRC-sponsored conference on 19 May.

□ It is expected that, amongst other things, the project will deliver:

□ a clear policy statement of what rural proofing and mainstreaming mean and look like at all levels of government;

□ a refreshed pack of rural proofing tools for policy makers and delivery managers; and

□ an engagement plan for working with Whitehall Departments, GOs, RDAs and Local Government on mainstreaming and rural proofing – this will include a series of short term secondments of CRC experts into Whitehall Departments and other bodies such as GOs



### Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) – Rural Proofing Toolkit Crispin Moor, Executive Director CRC

Crispin gave a very brief overview of the rural proofing toolkit and instead gave an impression of the potential for local engagement in mainstream rural proofing. He raised a number of key points:

- The fairness of service delivery and the rural context – some largely rural counties have largely urban settlements (e.g. Kent), whilst other largely urban counties or unitary authorities have rural fringes that become overlooked.
- The Local Area Agreement was a key tool for public service delivery and performance management for LAA targets could be critical for rural proofing in Devon. This could be achieved through monitoring delivery and the easiest ways to meet targets were often through market towns and urban areas.
- There was an opportunity through the Audit Commission and its review of the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA). The CRC were providing a briefing on rural issues in each area nationally. Many Local Authorities were carrying out self assessments through scrutiny committees, and the identification and promotion of good practice should form part of this.
- There were other ways to promote rural communities without 'rural proofing'. Sustainability could also be used as a tool, particularly with the development of the sustainable rural communities' toolkit (<http://www.ruraltoolkit.org.uk/>).
- Further links could be made with rural health auditors.
- There should be greater links with Town and Parish Councils. These were a proxy for communicating at the very local level, and the extent to which Local Authorities were engaging with parishes and local communities needed to be examined.

## **A Devon Perspective**

### **Rev. Philip Wagstaff, Chair of the Devon Rural Network and Consultation Response Group**

Philip gave a review of his experience of rural Devon (and other rural counties) and the issues, challenges, and benefits of living and working in rural areas. Points raised included

- Common themes could be identified through the Parish, and Market and Coastal Towns, planning process.
- Rural communities seeking a voice and a champion at all levels.
- Rural service delivery – how is it delivered and who pays?
- Devon is a large county and there needed to be greater recognition of local solutions.
- Who are the country dwellers and how are they perceived?
- Within Devon – diversity of rural contexts – across this large county there are different rural areas, each with their own history and vitality. ‘One size does not fit all’.
- Rural proofing is not rural isolationism.
- The structural development of policy needed to be considered.

Finally, some people and tools to assist this process:

- Expertise within the use and availability of the rural proofing toolkit.
- The role and place of Parish and Town plans which are becoming an increasing tool for the development of LSP priorities and opportunities.
- The sustainable rural communities’ toolkit.
- Information from the Rural Research units at Exeter and Plymouth Universities.
- Experience of the DRN Consultation Response Action Group (CRAG) and the work of DRN in compiling the Rural Strategy and the Rural Profile for Devon.
- The experience and expertise of Parish, Town, Borough and District, and County Councillors and Officers.
- The experience of the voluntary sector.
- Potential development of rural champions across the county.
- Links with Devon Town Forum, Devon Economic Partnership, Devon Strategic Partnership, and other pan Devon groups.

## **Panel Discussion and Q&A Session**

*In terms of the rural strategy, who has the agenda here? (Robin Head)*

Phil Wagstaff – The rural strategy should consider the needs of all parts of the community, both ‘historic’ and incomers. People often have differing ideas about how things should be done, but it should be an inclusive process so that everyone feels they have their say. There can be a large amount of time spent sitting on various committees.

David Kinross – The Community Council for Devon helps with parish planning. Local actors make things happen, but there are always groups that don’t engage. The rural agenda and parish planning need to be embedded in larger communities.

Tony Williamson – The question of how things go on without the full engagement of all is not an exclusively rural issue, and by and large rural areas address this better than other (urban) areas. These could learn from the rural example.

*Professional people are buying into the rural lifestyle and more effective communication is needed at this level (Cllr Philip Skinner)*

Crispin Moor – The CRC are involved in ‘Digital Britain’ at the strategic level, however there is still room for rural influence.

Tony Williamson – ICT is not the only solution to everything. It will bring new opportunities but it will need to be understood. It will also bring new issues to the debate, such as the relaxing of rules around overhead wiring, which will bring their own challenges.

Sally Foxhall – It could realistically be years before ICT infrastructure will reach some rural areas.

The question is how services can be delivered in rural areas. If delivery of outcomes is looked at in isolated pockets, national, and possibly regional, targets will not be met. The parish planning process only picks up the views of the outspoken. We should stop delivering services to the 'worried well' who can afford to access their own services, and should instead assess what health services can or can not be provided. A consensus should be reached but Devon is currently too far from this.

Very few Councillors at parish level could see the strategic level and there was now an added difficulty of new County Councillors needing to learn to think strategically.

*There is a requirement for housing, with current waiting lists (approximately 22,000), but the £1/2 million needed to supply these was not available. The loss of agricultural land to supply the desire for others to move to the county needed to be considered (Martin Taylor)*

Tony Williamson – There were LAA targets for housing in areas of less than 3,000 population. This highlighted the resources being allocated to address this. The provision was being assessed as top down targets based on statistics.

*Indicators and benchmarking also need to look at young people and the skills agenda. Priorities are set at the national level through the LSC but these do not reflect local need and can turn young people away from the land based sector for employment, which needs to be retaining young people. Rural should be included in each document for identification by search engines (Nick Creasy)*

Tony Williamson – Some documents are applicable to rural areas but implementation is not yet there. The sustainability of communities is reliant on young people; however communities struggle despite of policy. Young people need to be encouraged to stay, if they want to. There needs to be a proper mix of communities, not just the very young families or older incomers. Easy access to training may help to counter this, but it will need a business case highlighting real need and necessity.

Kate Cantwell – In terms of the issue of where young people fit back in, there is still a role for more urban elements when people return from university, with greater job opportunities and more affordable housing.

*The concept of rural proofing as a policy makers role, i.e. those who live in London and do not join up policy across central Government, can be frustrating for those at the local level trying to have an influence. Should rural proofing be a positive feedback mechanism for the local level to shape policy? It needs to be made clear what rural means and what, beyond scale, makes rural different from urban. (Andrew Lightfoot)*

Crispin Moor – This all happens at the local level and is where political decisions have to be taken, openly and transparently, particularly for service delivery. The rural proofing language in Devon can be the wrong language and should be more about how service delivery can be fair and equitable.

Tony Williamson – The concept of rural proofing does not mean the same in different areas. There is a risk of confusing the two roles of rural proofing, i.e. the CRC toolkit being aimed at policy makers, and the other process of local influence and ensuring local stakeholders are properly reflected through service delivery and feedback about what works to inform central Government.

Policy is defined at the national level, delivered at the local level, and mediated at the regional level. The outcome of policies needed to be assessed, with empowerment of Local Authorities to state whether policies work at the rural level.

Phil Wagstaff – The best time for rural proofing is before the policy is written.

- *Defra public sector targets have no provision for food self sufficiency*
- *Farmers need ICT to access the Defra website and download forms and documents, but Defra has a responsibility to provide these for those without good ICT access*

- *Newton Abbot MCTi – there has been a strong sign up from local people but funding is needed to move forward actions and this is not available from Government. This means that peoples expectations are not being delivered*
- *In Devon, skills and education is very underfunded*
- *Post Offices – local service provision and networks need to be reinstated*  
(Anthony Rew)

Tony Williamson – There are eight Public Service Agreements (PSAs), each signed up to by different departments within Government, which address some of these issues. A separate PSA specifically aimed at rural issues was not created.

*We have been told how policy can cascade down from Government, but how does information and service provision feed back up? There is a strong issue of service provision in rural areas and how this benefits central Government, along with a potential for skills development. There is a powerful opportunity for turning the discussion round for a more positive outlook. (Phil Le Grice)*

Tony Williamson – There is an example of this with farming and the perception from the public of farmers being a “drain” on the public purse. With farmers now being subsidised for environmental protection measures on their land there is now a feeling from the public that rural areas are contributing to society.

Crispin Moor – The CRC has been set up for work on rural disadvantage but there are many positives for rural areas, including the growth of the rural economy, uplands, carbon capture etc.

### **Closing Remarks**

Phil Wagstaff thanked Tony and Crispin for presenting, and the delegates for attending and taking part in such lively discussion. He gave an overview of a case study of rural proofing from the East of England Development Agency (Appendix 1) and summarised the main points of the meeting, with an outline of next steps in terms of rural proofing for Devon.

Additional Note:

[Crispin Moor has since published a blog on the NewStart website on the topic of rural proofing, “think rural, act rural”, which can be seen at <http://www.newstartmag.co.uk/blog/article/think-rural-act-rural/> ]

## Appendix 1

### **Rural proofing document from the East of England Development Agency**

Rural proofing assesses the possible differential impact of strategies, policies and project activities on rural communities. This differential impact might manifest itself in three different ways:

- Rural needs might differ from the needs of urban communities – there are no exclusively rural needs, but a number of needs (for example transport) may be more acute in rural areas
- Solutions to a given need for rural areas might differ from the solutions that work in urban areas
- Strategies, policies or project activities might result in (unintended) adverse consequences for rural communities, even if this is not the case for urban communities or only to a lesser extent

Finally, it is important to recognise that rural proofing refers to:

- The process of examining possible differential rural impacts
- The outcomes of this examination in terms of adjustments made
- Having a clear set of guidelines on how to identify distinct rural characteristics of geographical areas and how they may differ from urban areas

“What if our focus isn’t on rural issues?”

Rural proofing doesn’t mean that your strategies and policies must include a focus on rural needs. It may be that you choose to focus on urban issues, but rural proofing enables you to re-evaluate your priorities or make explicit your urban focus and reasons behind this focus. It does not prescribe any outcomes in terms of rural prioritisation or insist that a proportion of your budget must be allocated for rural projects or rural priorities.

### *In Summary*

Rural proofing means:

- The process through which stakeholders assess the differential impact of the overall strategic priority-setting and specific interventions on rural communities
- The adjustments made to the overall strategic priority-setting or to specific interventions as a result of the identification of any adverse impacts
- Having clear guidelines of identifying distinct rural needs

The three key questions for rural proofing your programme are:

- How does the programme address the needs of rural communities?
- To what extent has the programme developed specific solutions to enable rural communities to benefit fully from its initiatives?
- In what ways might the programme lead to any (unintended) adverse impacts on rural communities and what can be done to avoid, minimise or negate this impact?

With thanks to Jasmine Joolia Regional Project Officer Rural Action East  
[www.RuralActionEast.org.uk](http://www.RuralActionEast.org.uk)

## ***Appendix 2 - Delegates***

Allie Clark	Economic Development Officer	Teignbridge District Council
Andrew Lightfoot	Head of Regeneration	Devon County Council
Anthony Rew	Regional & Devon Chair	NFU
David Kinross	Senior Projects Officer	Community Council of Devon
Debbie Williams	Partnership Coordinator	Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service
Denise Ramsay	Team Leader – South Devon	Natural England
Heather Hillman	Rural Development Manager	Devon County Council
Ian Mercer	Chairman	Dartmoor Commoners Council
Kate Cantwell	Policy/Locality Officer, Communities and Strategy	Devon County Council
Leanne Crawford	Coordinator	Devon Rural Network
Lucy Gough	Project Assistant	Devon Rural Network
Martin Taylor	Chairman	Devon Conservation Forum
Nick Creasy	County Organiser	Devon Federation of Young Farmers
Philip Le Grice	Research Director	Duchy College
Philip Skinner	Councillor (Rural Champion)	East Devon District Council
Robin Head	Secretary	Devon Farms Accommodation
Roland Pyle	Development Officer, Communities and Strategy	Devon County Council
Sally Foxhall	Chair	Devon Strategic Partnership
Sarah Tickner	Speciality Registrar in Public Health	Devon PCT
Sarah Woollacott	RDPE Project Development Officer	Devon County Council
Steve Opie	Director of Operations	South West Pound Ltd
Sue Rees	Senior Policy Advisor	GOSW
Tim Matthews	Devon Area	Environment Agency