

**Devon Rural Network Policy Steering Group Meeting
21st July 2008, Old Police Station Café, Princetown**

Rural Advocate Round Table Discussion

Main Issues raised:

- Low wages and high rainfall, particularly in the Dartmoor region. The latter increases the cost of heating and maintaining properties, and for many low income households housing maintenance grants are essential
- South West Water is investing in work on Exmoor around flood control etc, could the same be done on Dartmoor?
- The South West uplands are generally wetter and milder than in other counties, which is significant in terms of the "cattle country" of the south west and Dartmoor and its management and grazing regime
- Hill farms are needed for land management, and the resulting public benefits, e.g. tourism, water retention and carbon sinks
- The economic and social benefits of uplands needs to be valued in real terms, and it can be argued that this is not currently being adequately recognised by the National Park Authorities
- There is a huge potential for Dartmoor to produce mutton, however there is no supply chain for this at present. Can the market demand be analysed?
- The distinctiveness of the SW uplands needs greater recognition
- There have been problems with agri-environment schemes, and transitions between them, in terms of relative incomes and income deficit. Farmers should also be paid for all of the benefits they offer, i.e. land management, water retention, carbon storage etc [although these could be difficult to put a monetary value to]
- The Upland Entry Level Scheme in development is too Northern centric
- Water rates are high in the South West due to the coasts – this cost has fallen locally and not nationally. There is a danger that the same will happen with uplands, and it needs to be seen as a national dimension, not just a local one
- Water retention – could funds be available through the flood prevention budget? Need to look at not just the level of rainfall, but also the rates of rainfall, i.e. the same amount of water falling over differing timescales and associated impacts
- Community issues are exacerbated in upland areas due to sparsity and distance
- Public purchase – demand for the average sized hill farm has fallen by 70% and there has been a dramatic change in public spend to benefits received
- Dartmoor Prison – the Forestry Commission have run a very successful project with the inmates of the prison looking at forestry skills. This project could provide a model for elsewhere and highlights that areas such as Princetown could be used as a testbed for similar projects to be piloted and rolled out

- There has been a successful MCTi in Princetown, but the programme has not been as successful in other areas as a planning process. However, although the MCTi model has not always bought in the expected finances, it has allowed the development and generation of linkages both within and outside of communities, though engagement and consultation
- There is a need to enable people to find local solutions – i.e. allowing established communities to find capacity, and factor in community context (i.e. effects of tourism and seasonality in many rural communities)
- Need to demonstrate strong community support. Develop the Community Board idea that has been suggested in the context of the Boundary Commission preliminary report
- Market towns process and Parish plans process have stopped funding capacity building and community led planning – Central Government has not picked this up through either replacement funding streams or policy decisions
- Management capacity is often lacking considerably in communities, despite project funding [example given of a youth project in Hatherleigh which has funding but is not being delivered due to a lack of local capacity]
- Rural access underpins everything but is often overlooked and forgotten. It may be beneficial for rural areas to move away from conventional public transport, and to empower communities to create their own transport solutions. There should be greater flexibility in the forthcoming Transport Bill
- Reimbursement rate for volunteer drivers has remained at 40 pence per mile for a number of years. With increasing fuel prices and associated costs, the number of volunteer drivers is beginning to decrease significantly
- Need to look at alternatives to conventional transport. Stagecoach have expressed concern over reimbursement for the new concessionary fares and many services are becoming increasingly uneconomical
- The agenda in many agencies and organisations is often urban centred – this model needs to be put in a rural context and the unintended consequences of an urban agenda on rural areas needs to be examined
- The expectation of sustainability is being looked at at too high a level i.e. Westminster, and often has no real relevance at the local level
- The CRC State of the Countryside Report highlights a high rate of inward migration. Some of these people will not connect with their new community and a relatively large number will be retirees. These groups will have a large impact on both health services and transport. These issues are already increasing and will continue to do so
- [Stuart Burgess stated that any government will be urban focused as this is where the majority of the votes lie]
- Public awareness is the biggest problem and this needs to be reawakened
- Public spend per head in rural areas of England needs comparison with same in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, and all urban areas. It is often far lower in the rural areas of England and hard figures are needed to challenge assumptions

- Rivalry between upland and lowland farming in the past, and currently, has led some of the negative situations that farmers, and rural areas, are facing
- Many young people in rural areas do not expect to work on farms or as hard as many past and current farmers do. There is a large outward migration of young people from rural areas to urban centres. The skill base for the land based sector is also lacking
- Lack of desire for young people to become involved in the agricultural sector may be due largely to the level of income, which is too low for many to consider. Could young people challenge and change this?
- Many farms have more than one source of income, therefore there may be more commitment from people of a traditional farming background to remain on the farm – they are less likely to want to see the loss of the traditional family home and may be willing to diversify to increase income
- There needs to be consideration of upland rural areas in the context of the current economic situation and its effects; and what government money is spent on
- It needs to be remembered that the rural communities feed the country and that food security is increasing higher on the political agenda

Top Two Issues Around The Table

- High living costs and low incomes
- SW uplands are different from other counties
- Longer term and more available rural funding [continuity funding]
- More support for the Voluntary Sector
- Social Enterprise is not always the solution
- There needs to be a repository of skills, knowledge and understanding which can be drawn on in future
- Less urban versus rural but look instead to strengthening links between them
- An increase in the burdensome regulations on farmers in a time of increasing need for food security
- Access to services and new ways for delivery
- Post Offices – a disproportionately high number of services in Devon have been either designated for closure or for replacement outreach services. The “crow flies” distance measurement is not a true reflection of actual distance or difficulty in accessibility (especially in context of narrow rural roads). [Stuart Burgess and John Coleman reported that work is underway in Essex looking at similar issues and that models developed in Essex could be rolled out elsewhere]. Limited services offered by some branches can cause problems, e.g. passport checking can only be conducted by a limited number of branches even though it is only a case of checking a form
- Broadband and ICT provision are a real issue in Devon and the service is poor in many part of Devon. Some areas are still unable to access broadband whilst many others receive a low bandwidth and slow connection speed [the Rural Futures Unit at Plymouth University is currently researching rural ICT and broadband accessibility]
- Funding should be available to support effective existing services, not just “innovative” new ideas