Select Committee on the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006

Corrected oral evidence: Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006

Tuesday 5 September 2017
11.50 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Cameron of Dillington (Chairman); Earl of Arran; Lord Faulkner of Worcester; Lord Foster of Bishop Auckland; Lord Harrison; Countess of Mar; Baroness Parminter; Baroness Scott of Needham Market; Baroness Whitaker.

Evidence Session No. 3 Heard in Public Questions 18 - 24

Witness

I: Dr Stuart Burgess CBE.
Examination of witness

Dr Stuart Burgess.

Q18 **The Chairman:** Good morning, Dr Burgess. Thank you for coming to give evidence to the Select Committee on the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. You have in front of you a list of interests that have been declared by members of the Committee. The meeting is being broadcast live via the parliamentary website. A transcript will be taken and published on the Committee website, and you will have the opportunity to make corrections to it where necessary. From your perspective as the former chairman of the Commission for Rural Communities, what would you say it achieved in its time, and is there anything it did less well than it should have done? What do you think it could have achieved given more time?

**Dr Stuart Burgess:** Lord Chairman and members of the Committee, I am delighted to be here and to be able to put forward some answers to the questions.

The most important of the CRC’s achievements was that it gave a rural voice to almost 12 million people living in rural England. The rural voice was about giving a voice especially to the social and economic needs and issues of the countryside. It also related well to communities and to government. As the Chairman knows, I had dual roles: chair of the Commission for Rural Communities and that of the rural advocate. These two were related in many ways and brought together some of the powerful voice that I believe the CRC and the rural advocate gave to rural community issues. The role was grounded because I made many visits around the countryside and travelled extensively around rural England. I met people in pubs, village halls and so on. So the initial answer is that the body gave that rural voice and helped people to have the kind of focus that could relate well to government.

The other part of the answer relates to the evidence-based work and reports that we did, and the focus in particular on some of the major issues facing rural communities. For example, affordable housing is the No. 1 issue out there in rural England. It has been for a number of years and still is. I am a great personal supporter of building 10 or 15 affordable homes in every village, because that creates sustainability for the future of rural communities.

Linked to that, we did a major piece of work on the digital divide, which is about broadband and mobile phone access. The emphasis was on helping the rural economy to grow and develop without rural broadband. There are many places—I chair a charity in Somerset—where rural broadband is almost non-existent. That is almost unacceptable in today’s world and needs to be addressed. We put a lot of effort into that.

Another great achievement was in transport, where we gathered shared practice. There are no easy answers on rural transport, but the CRC gathered examples of some very good practice. Cumbria and especially
Lincolnshire, for example, produce some good models. We were able to
gather that shared practice and try to replicate it in other areas.

Another achievement that I want to dwell on for a moment because of
my great interest in social justice—my background is in the church, as
many of you will know—related to the rural disadvantaged. For any
Government, that is hard to take on board for the countryside. The
perception of a rural idyll and of everyone being rich in the countryside is
wrong. The CRC’s research came up with figures—they were challenged
by government, as was its right—showing that around 1.5 million people
in rural areas live in disadvantage and below the poverty line. It was a
great achievement to highlight that and to bring it to government’s
attention.

We made a major contribution in relation to health. A lot of people who
live in rural areas are elderly and suffer from health problems. We had a
major input into the Darzi report on the future of the NHS and highlighted
some of the major rural issues faced at that point. We produced an
annual countryside report, which was a great gathering of data. It was
interesting that Jim Paice, who was then a Defra Minister, held up the
countryside report at a party conference and said, “This is my bible about
the countryside”. There is a sense in which that was true, because it
gathered the insights, the figures and the data that provided the evidence
for building on some kind of research.

Perhaps I might mention two other major achievements. The first was to
do with the rural economy. We produced in my estimation an important
contribution to the rural economy. The rural economy has the ability to
produce an enormous amount of money. The research that is being done
at Newcastle at the moment, for example, estimates that the rural
economy is worth around £400 billion. When we were doing our piece of
work, we did not come up with the figure of £400 billion but with £250
billion to £300 billion, to be improved on.

The perception is that the rural economy is based on farming and
agriculture. That is true up to a point. Agriculture has shaped the wonder
and beauty of our countryside. On the other hand, the majority of
businesses in the countryside are not related to agriculture and farming. I
worked especially with WiRE—Women in Rural Enterprise—and pay
tribute to the work that they did, because we linked together and were
able to provide some good evidence of how the rural economy could be
enhanced. Towards the end of the CRC, we were able to produce one of
the best reports that it achieved. It was about the future of the uplands
and brought together a lot of good evidence-based work, and it showed
how interrelated the agriculture industry is with the social and economic
needs and issues of the countryside. The uplands report is a very good
example of what we achieved.

What did we do less well? For me, the greatest challenge was rural
proofing. How do we make sure that all government Bills are rural-
proofed, have a rural dimension and take “rural” seriously? My own
perception is that it was dependent on the Ministers in particular
departments. In education, for example, the Ministers with whom I worked then took rural proofing very seriously, because it was a major issue. It is still a major issue. Most of the money to fund schools goes, as we know, to urban schools. We need money put into rural schools. Rural proofing was dependent on the priorities that particular departments set. If rural proofing was not embedded in those departments’ and their Ministers’ thinking, it had a much lower profile than hitherto. In the departments where it was embedded—I have given education as a good example—rural proofing worked extremely well where it was seen. However, it was really hard, and with hindsight we could have done it better.

How we could have done it better is still a big challenge to me, because, as I have said, it depends on the priorities of the departments. Had CRC had more time—I wish that it had had, but it was not to be—there are a number of things that I would like to have done. The first was the implementation of some of the recommendations of the uplands report that I have already referred to. After the CRC was abolished, I did some work on helping set up a college in Newton Rigg in Cumbria for young hill farmers, but there were other recommendations that I would have liked to have time to work on. As I indicated, it came right at the end of the demise of the CRC.

I would like to have done further work on the rural economy. I am a great believer in the rural economy and looking at how it can be more efficient and how it can work. That is linked to broadband, obviously. As a very good example, I remember visiting a micro business on a little industrial estate in Bideford. Fortunately, it had good broadband. It was doing high-precision medical work and sending it out to Africa. It just showed what can be achieved. The potential, I believe, is still there in the rural economy.

I would love to have done more work on housing. Towards the end of the CRC, I was doing quite a lot of work with Lord Taylor—Matthew Taylor—on community land trusts. The community land trust is still one of the major ways forward. I would love to have spent more time with him; he has developed a good model in Cornwall that can be replicated. I am a great personal fan of community land trusts. If we had had the ability, I would have put my energy into doing some work on that.

I would also have done work on encouraging the voluntary and community sector out there in rural communities. As I travelled extensively around rural England, I was very impressed by how committed many people are. One good example is in Blisland in Cornwall, where the local community got together. Fortunately, they had some Objective 1 money, but they managed to raise money themselves to build a community hub. It was a place where the doctor called, it was the place where they established an internet café, and it was a shop and a great facility. We have more shared ownership now in the form of community pubs and shops. I would have liked the ability to encourage that sector as well.
I hope that has answered some of your questions.

**The Chairman:** Thank you very much for that most comprehensive response.

**Baroness Whitaker:** Dr Burgess, you have obviously demonstrated a degree of independence in the very interesting account that you have given. What was the benefit of having a rural voice sitting outside a government department, and were there any drawbacks?

**Dr Stuart Burgess:** I think there was great benefit in having an independent rural voice. I guarded my independence quite strongly. I was very conscious that my duty was to stand apart from politics and political parties. I went to all the party conferences and I related well, I believe, not only to Ministers but to shadow Ministers. I think that the role being independent was especially valued by local communities as I went out there. They did not see me as a representative of Defra or the Government, which was marvellous. When that happened, I thought that I was making a point and had achieved something.

I also think that local communities, because I stressed my independence, felt that they could trust me to be able to go back to government and to relate their issues and concerns. Obviously, it had to go through a particular process, but that strong independent voice was very important. I believe that I gained that kind of respect. The independent voice also gave me the ability to act speedily. As a good example of this, foot and mouth broke out in Surrey at the time of the party conferences. I went down there and was immediately called to Cumbria, because there was a great debate about whether the movement of livestock should continue. I was able to have that independence outside the strictures of the political framework, which was vital.

As for drawbacks, I saw none whatever, to be honest. You can probably tell that I thoroughly enjoyed my work as chair and rural advocate, but I highly valued my independence. In the end, it is about relationships: how do you relate to people and how do you gain their confidence not being part of government but being paid by it? It is about walking that fine line but gaining their trust.

**Baroness Whitaker:** We live in a time when politicians and Governments are perhaps not as highly regarded as in the past. Is it all the more important to have an independent voice to advocate rural interests?

**Dr Stuart Burgess:** I believe so now, building on my experience. All I can say is that I found that incredibly valuable. To gain that respect for independence is built on trust. That is not to say that politicians cannot be trusted—I would not want to say that for a moment—but to stand apart gives you some kind of authority.

**Baroness Parminter:** What concerns did you have when the CRC was disbanded, and did they materialise?
Dr Stuart Burgess: Obviously, I was concerned about the loss of the rural voice, the loss of that great feeling of independent expert advice to government on rural issues and rural policy, and the loss of good evidence-based reports. The CRC put in an enormous amount of time and expertise. I pay tribute to the staff of CRC, who provided some good evidence-based reports. That is lacking.

Also lacking is the emphasis on the social and economic issues and the needs of the countryside. There is greater emphasis on farming and agriculture—I have some very good friends who are farmers who work in the agriculture industry, and I am very committed to them. What has been lost is the emphasis on the more social and economic issues that I have identified, such as housing, broadband and transport. I can quite see how and why it has happened, but it has been a great loss. The uplands report was a superb example of how you bring those two elements and those two sides together, but with the demise of CRC that emphasis has been lost. My feeling is that research and analysis are now driven by political priorities. I can see the reason for that, but it means that many rural issues, and concerns that I have in particular, have been side-lined.

Baroness Parminter: You clearly articulate the case that evidence base is important. The task we face now is that when we leave the European Union we will have even less evidence, because until now we had to report on policy issues to the European Union, but that will fall away. If you had a magic wand, in what way would you bring back the evidence base that you think is critical to your policy? What would the mechanism be, and who would do it?

Dr Stuart Burgess: My feeling is that government has to do it. I do not think anyone else will. In the light of Brexit, for example, it is right for rural policies to be rethought. I think the mechanism for doing so would be trying to bring together both the agricultural interests and the social and economic issues. I think that is possible. What happened in the Act was the separation of some of those issues. I agree that the mechanism might be difficult to achieve, but it is very important—at least, if we had a magic wand—to be able to bring those two sides together so that there is interrelatedness in the whole.

Q21 Lord Foster of Bishop Auckland: You spoke very eloquently about the importance of a strong, independent rural voice. How do you think the three main roles of adviser, advocate and watchdog are being fulfilled in government now, if at all?

Dr Stuart Burgess: As far as I know, there seems to be little evidence of that happening. The advocacy voice, for example, has been lost. In the documents that led up to the abolition of the CRC it was said that the MPs, and there are many of them, who represent rural constituencies would be those advocates. I agree with that, apart from the fact that many MPs have a lot of duties to perform, and advocacy of the rural issue can be only one part of their business. The advocacy voice is lost also because there is no one person or organisation bringing it all together,
and although I applaud the MPs in their rural constituencies and the work that they do, there needs to be an overarching voice coming through that picks up all those different strands and has the ability to share best practice. There is lots of good practice out there that could be shared. The advocacy is rather lost.

Defra has proposed a document about how departments should ensure that rural proofing takes place, but my understanding is that it is too late in the game. I am a great believer that if we are going to do rural proofing at all it has to be right at the beginning of the legislation and not halfway through. In other words, it has to be conceptual; it has to be in the philosophy and the thinking before it gets to hard legislation. Although I applaud the fact that Defra has produced that particular document, it is too late.

There is a lack of integration of policy across government departments and between central and local government. It is interesting that the recent rural economy initiatives have come from No. 10, such as the rural economics growth plan, or from the Treasury, such as the rural productivity plan, and not from Defra. That says it all to me. It is also interesting that Defra is preparing 25-year strategies for agriculture and for the environment but not for the rural economies and the communities. It is a great shame that that has been missed.

Obviously, I applaud the fact that there is support for rural social innovation, ACRE and the RFFs, but on the whole many of these roles have now been lost, sadly. Some are there but at a very low level. We need to recapture some of those roles to make an impact for the rural communities. That is what I am about: trying to improve the lot of rural communities, to help them to face some of their issues and concerns and to change and transform the countryside.

Q22 Lord Faulkner of Worcester: Can I ask you a slightly personal question? When you got word of the abolition of the commission, how did you and your fellow commissioners feel about that? Did you read about it, as a number of non-departmental public body heads did, in a piece in the Daily Telegraph, for example, or were you properly consulted?

Dr Stuart Burgess: We were properly consulted, I was properly consulted, and I pay tribute to the people who put me in the picture on what was happening. There was a little twist in all this. Obviously, the CRC was part of the bonfire of the quangos, and I was very keen in the discussion with Defra that the independent rural voice should not be lost. I pushed that pretty hard with Ministers and with civil servants in Defra. The compromise was made that CRC would be part of the bonfire of the quangos but that there would be an office for the rural advocate in Defra holding on to the independent rural voice, with a small budget. That was agreed within Defra and by the Secretary of State, Caroline Spelman. Then, sadly in my estimation, it was pushed back by the Cabinet Office and the whole thing was lost.
To answer your question, I was consulted, but I was sad that we lost both strands: the CRC and that independent rural voice.

The Chairman: If there was to be a body charged with rural advocacy, where within government should it sit—or without government maybe, I do not know?

Dr Stuart Burgess: I think I would argue for it to be in the Cabinet Office. That might not be very popular, because the Cabinet Office might want to push things out, as it were, but that would give it a very central role and give certainty and support to rural communities out there. It is very important to give the 12 million rural people that kind of support.

Q23 Lord Faulkner of Worcester: Can you think back to the 2006 Act? How well do you think it engaged with social and economic rural issues in general—apart, obviously, from the creation of the CRC?

Dr Stuart Burgess: My personal reflection on the Act is that it is very farm-centric. As I said, in a sense I have nothing against that because I have a great commitment to agriculture myself. But it did not take on the importance of communities and issues out there, and in a sense it was a retrograde step to take. I think it worked against the integration of rural policy by separating the environment and the social aspects of delivery, and the uplands are, I think, an example of that.

The economic and social aspects were to be addressed, as we know, by the CRC and indeed by the RDAs, neither of which now exists. The CRC lacked the money but did a valuable job with limited resources. It also lacked delivery powers, which was a shame. If it had had the ability to deliver more, that would have been helpful. I know that you, Lord Chairman, know a good deal about the discontinuation of the market towns initiative, for example, which was part of that. I do not think that the rural unit that was set up has been an adequate substitute for what has happened.

Lord Faulkner of Worcester: That is what you would describe as a being missing from the structures in the provisions in the Act?

Dr Stuart Burgess: Indeed.

Baroness Whitaker: We have had evidence about an inherent tension between agricultural interests and environmental interests and that Defra is therefore not the best structure for dealing with these issues. What is your view about that, because the environmental side is perhaps a little apart from the social and economic issues that you talk about, and perhaps that is a way of trying to take account of the inherent value of the kind of countryside that we have, which is part of our national identity and brings in all sorts of other considerations beside social and economic issues? I am talking really about the kind of governance structure that we ought to have. I quite take your point about independence, but if you are independent you lose a certain amount of power. If you have your Cabinet Office structure, which is a very interesting idea, what should happen about strife between agricultural
interests and environmental interests, or do you think there is no inherent problem?

**Dr Stuart Burgess:** There is a relationship between all of them. I realise the problem when I say that the rural voice could be in the Cabinet Office, because then there is the environment and agriculture to consider, as you rightly said. There is a need to get the relationship right between the Cabinet Office and wherever the other areas are located, for example in Defra, because in the end it is about relationships. If you get that relationship right, it can work. Obviously there is that connection between the environment, agriculture and all the social issues and concerns, but because the environment issues can be so large and the agriculture issues can be so large and dominant, the rural voice is lost. If I may, I suggest that the rural voice in all this is so very important and could influence the insights into agriculture and the environment.

**Baroness Whitaker:** In the Cabinet Office, are you advocating a rural interests Minister, or are you saying that there should be an independent adviser to the Cabinet Office?

**Dr Stuart Burgess:** I would go for an independent adviser.

Q24

**Baroness Scott of Needham Market:** Staying with the overall theme of the way in which government engages in rural issues, can you name something that gives you cause for optimism at the moment—something that is going well—and something about which you are more worried?

Finally, if, when we produce our report, there is one recommendation in it that would make you say, “Yes, that is just what I wanted to see in there”, what would that be?

**Dr Stuart Burgess:** One thing that is going well is in farming and agriculture. Because of Brexit, for example, we have the demise of the common agricultural policy, the single farm payment and rural development funding such as LEADER. There is an onus on Defra at the moment to deliver after Brexit, and quite rightly. How do you get that right for the farming community? Although a lot of it is uncertain at the moment, a lot of energy is being put into that at the moment, which is great.

One thing that is not going well is delivery on affordable housing, which is quite tragic, because it is the key to the transformation of rural communities. A good example is Holy Island. A number of years ago people there got together and produced some affordable housing, which transformed that community.

Sorry, your last point again?

**Baroness Scott of Needham Market:** One recommendation that would gladden your heart if we were to make it.

**Dr Stuart Burgess:** It would gladden my heart if an independent rural voice was established.
The Chairman: That might be one conclusion that we come to. You have mentioned the rural voice several times. Perhaps stepping back from that, is there any other way, apart from establishing a new independent body, that we could turn the volume up on? How do we re-establish the rural voice? In the same breadth, how do we get rural poverty and deprivation back on to the political agenda?

Dr Stuart Burgess: You get it back on the agenda by having this independent rural voice, to be perfectly honest. If you had it, that person would pick up those issues, bring them to the fore and make certain, hopefully, that notice in government was taken.

Lord Harrison: As an ardent atheist, I picked up your hint of your Methodist background. Would you like to comment on that and link it to your passion for housing and strengthening communities? I ask that, because 10 years ago I had a very long debate in the Chamber on the failure to transform, especially in the countryside, places of religion into places that strengthened local ties.

Another of the phrases that you have used this morning is “shared accommodation”; things could be done in churches and Methodist halls in order to provide for people the strength they need.

Dr Stuart Burgess: Thank you for your question. I have great respect for you. I was chair of the York and Hull Methodist District before I became the successor to the Chairman. There, I gained an insight into all those rural issues. You are absolutely right, and forgive me for not saying it before, that the churches in the countryside, irrespective of denomination—I am rising above denominations at the moment; yes, I am a Methodist—are more than well placed to deliver on many of those issues.

I can assure you that I have challenged a number of Churches, especially the Church of England and my own Church, the Methodist Church, on affordable housing, for example, so I am not coming down entirely on the Churches at this point. There are many good examples, such as churches hosting post offices and libraries, and I am a great believer that every rural village should have some kind of hub. I am not particularly concerned about whether it is a village hall, a pub or a church, but there needs to be a focus, and if you have a focus you can transform the communities and bring together so many of the delivery points. The Churches are well placed to do that. If I may, I challenge the Churches through this Committee to do that. Because they are present in rural communities, nearly all rural communities have some kind of church. In my estimation, it is a nonsense—I will put it quite strongly—that many of those buildings are standing idle during the week and could be used as a great hub to transform rural communities.

Baroness Parminter: You have talked a lot about the importance of an independent rural voice. When you were in the roles that you were in, how did you respond to the view that there is no such thing as a rural voice because you have exactly the same problems in rural communities
as in urban communities; it is just that, because of the location and sparsity of population, you have different solutions? Equally, communities differ from Cumbria to Cornwall to Surrey et cetera. Could you give to the Committee some confidence that there is such a thing as a need for a rural voice, as opposed to the case you made very coherently for rural evidence?

**Dr Stuart Burgess:** You are absolutely right that communities across the country, in Cumbria and Cornwall et cetera, are very different, but there are many linkage points. It is important to bring those common strands together and to link them. The rural voice picks them up. You are absolutely right, too, that many issues in rural and urban areas are the same, such as affordable housing. I do not think that broadband is, nor is transport, but there are challenges relating to schools. There are particular issues out there in the countryside. I still believe that that single rural voice can pick up those themes and feed them in to the evidence that you are talking about. Evidence is very important, and I am a great believer in producing strong, evidence-based work. But it has to be rooted somewhere. The rural voice can provide that sense of rootedness.

**The Chairman:** You have mentioned EU money twice—Objective 1 money in respect of Blisland in Cornwall and LEADER funding. Post Brexit, if there was to be some funding by the Treasury, how would it best be delivered? Would it be through local authorities? Would it be through a Defra delivery body? Would it be through DCLG or perhaps the LEPs? How do you see that sort of money coming down to the communities and the rural economy, where it really matters, throughout England?

**Dr Stuart Burgess:** That is a very interesting question. I have had quite a lot of dealings with the LEPs, especially down in Cornwall—you mentioned the Objective 1 money there. The LEP could be a way forward if it was rethought, because some LEPs that I have come across are still very urban focused. It is important to make sure that they take on board that there is nearly always a great rural dimension to the areas that they cover. The LEPs could be explored.

**The Earl of Arran:** What do you think will happen to Cornwall without European money?

**Dr Stuart Burgess:** It is a very interesting question that I am not sure I am qualified to answer.

**The Chairman:** Thank you very much, Dr Burgess, for coming to give us evidence today.