Select Committee on the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006

Corrected oral evidence: Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006

Tuesday 17 October 2017
11.05 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Cameron of Dillington (The Chairman); The Earl of Arran; Baroness Byford; The Earl of Caithness; Viscount Chandos; Lord Faulkner of Worcester; The Countess of Mar; Baroness Parminter; Baroness Whitaker; Baroness Scott of Needham Market.

Evidence Session No. 6 Heard in Public Questions 37 - 47

Witness

I: Tim Bonner, Chief Executive, Countryside Alliance.
Examination of witness

Tim Bonner.

Q37 The Chairman: Good morning. Welcome, Mr Bonner, chief executive of the Countryside Alliance, to this 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 and a transcript of the meeting will be taken and published on the Committee website. You will have an opportunity to make corrections to that transcript where necessary.

For the record, do you want to introduce yourself? You could make an introductory statement if you like, or we can go straight into the questions.

Tim Bonner: I have been working for the Countryside Alliance since 2002. I was previously a farmer. I farmed in north Devon and I got a degree in countryside management, somewhere in the mists of time, from the now defunct Wye College, which was part of the University of London. My roles have been various, but I have been chief executive for a couple of years. I have been involved, across the range of our issues, for that whole time.

As for my opening remarks, we have an extraordinary asset in our countryside. It is a national treasure. "Iconic" is a word that is often used, but we must remember—and our role is to remind you and others—that it is somewhere where people work and it is their home as well as that iconic asset. Those who live and work in the countryside can be forgiven for feeling from time to time that it is treated like a theme park, perhaps not receiving the political support that it needs and deserves.

There are special challenges. We are not here to argue that it is fundamentally worse or better to live in the countryside, but it is different; there is no doubt about that at all. That means that the countryside often needs different solutions and policies from urban and suburban areas. This is something that we work on and urge all political parties to do, as we did in the recent election. That said, we are also aware that there is a huge complexity in defining the rural community, with changing demographics. Those who live in the countryside are now, in many areas, detached from core rural industries. It is a very difficult thing to define, but undoubtedly there are differences. We seek to ensure that policy addresses them.

We are also very aware that Brexit will be front and centre of the work of this Parliament. Perhaps more than many other areas, the decision to leave the EU will have profound effects on the countryside. At the same time, other issues such as affordable housing and broadband, which I know the Committee would like to discuss later, remain critically important. Those must not be forgotten as the Government negotiate their way out of Brexit and start to develop new policies.
We were formed just over 20 years ago. We have 100,000 members and supporters. Our role is to make those people’s voices heard. We hope to have a significant impact on rural policy and the political landscape as it develops.

**The Chairman:** Before I opened my mouth, I should have declared an interest as a member of the Countryside Alliance. Thank you for those introductory remarks. As you personally go back so far, what were your dealings with the Commission for Rural Communities? What do you think it did well and what perhaps less well?

**Tim Bonner:** We welcomed the creation of the CRC under the Bill back in 2006. It was created in 2007-08. The aims were clearly laudable, especially the aim to give rural communities an independent voice. At the time, however, we raised concerns about the commitment to represent, rather than work with, rural communities and questioned whether that was the way forward.

“Rural proofing” is a term that we will discuss later, but it was a phrase that came out of the early 2000s, in the period around foot and mouth and the creation of Defra, when there was a lot of discussion of rural policy. Rural proofing perhaps did not have either the focus or the teeth in that Bill. We are concerned that, in some areas, the CRC did not live up to expectations. It perhaps did not have the teeth to hold government to account, and there was no duty on any department to consult with it over the development of rural policy.

What did rural proofing mean in that context? At times it was used by government as an obstacle to ease discourse between Whitehall and the countryside, or to block discourse in some ways, rather than to have direct political communication. Where Defra in particular and other departments should have been taking a direct role in communication, it was almost pushed off: “Talk to the CRC”. There were issues to do with resources and delivery.

While the legislation perhaps did not focus on it enough in the first place, the CRC could have been more dynamic about how government policy was rural proofed across Whitehall and spoken out more on that issue. Granted, we have already accepted that it was difficult for it to do, given that it did not have direct powers.

The CRC became an authority, and extremely useful for organisations like ours, in the provision of the rural evidence base. The annual report, *The State of the Countryside*, was seen as authoritative and gave a basis on which organisations like ours could campaign. It produced other reports on issues from broadband to the uplands, which helped an agenda that was deeply felt in the countryside.

Since its abolition, there has been a loss of that research facility. Defra has produced the statistical digest, but it is a different beast. We do not feel that it has as much sway as *The State of the Countryside* did. In the context of rural policy, the Government have become more reliant on
individual organisations and pressure groups producing their own reports, which is not a bad thing in itself but can mean that you get a skewed and single-issue take on certain issues. That is a theme that might develop through this discussion: if we are looking at environment, community and agriculture in separate boxes, we are never going to get any real sensible policy development, because the three are so massively interlinked. Since the abolition of the CRC especially, we tend to look at those things in those terms.

Q39 The Countess of Mar: Good morning, Mr Bonner. Do you think the absence of the CRC has left a gap in the way the Government relate to rural areas? Where is the absence most keenly felt?

Tim Bonner: We do not think there should be that much of a gap, because it should be the role of government and politicians to engage directly with rural communities. At times, the CRC allowed government departments, particularly Defra, to avoid and to push off the difficult issues that they did not want to handle or deal directly with rural communities on. There should not be a gap. It is difficult to define what a rural community is, but it is not indefinable. There is a department tasked to deal with rural affairs. The communication between government and those communities should not be that difficult.

The area where the CRC could have delivered more was in bringing government at a wider level to understand the importance of the policies that departments other than Defra were developing on the rural proofing agenda. There is no one there to replicate that at the moment.

Baroness Byford: I declare an interest as a member of the Countryside Alliance. Having said that Defra has not managed to go across all departments as was anticipated, if it was not put in Defra in the first place, which department would you have seen it in? Do you have a view on that?

Tim Bonner: We have a view on what we would like in the future. It seems to us that the only place you can have a proper view of policy development across all departments is in the Cabinet Office. The fact that no one was ever tasked with ensuring that rural issues and the rural proofing thing were delivered is probably one reason why that has not occurred. The political power lies with the Secretary of State through the Cabinet sign-off process. Does he have a full view of what policy is being developed, and at an early stage? If rural proofing was successful—and it may be; it is difficult to know, because there is no reporting and the rest of it—policies would be either dropped or amended at a very early stage in the development process, so we would not really know about it. That would be a successful and proper rural proofing process from our perspective. The Cabinet Office is the only place where you have that full view, we feel.

Lord Faulkner of Worcester: It seems that your rural charter expresses concern about the state of various rural services. In which of those do you think rural communities are less well served or under
greater threat than urban and suburban communities? I notice, for example, that you make no reference to public transport, either rural rail or rural bus services. Was that omission deliberate?

Tim Bonner: It was probably largely because our agenda is rather larger than our resources. Rural transport is an issue that we have campaigned on in the past. There is a general theme developing around the ability to access services and whether there are specific issues for those who live in rural communities, particularly remote rural communities, in accessing them.

I am sure we will talk more about broadband later, but the Government have a direct policy to bring as much service provision online as they can. For most of the United Kingdom with a decent level of broadband access, that is hugely sensible. It is cheaper, cleaner and more effective. If you live somewhere where broadband is intermittent at best, that is simply not feasible. We have heard government Ministers saying, “You can go to the library if you want internet access”. That is not an answer. They are only giving that answer, in fairness to them, because they have not thought through the impact of the policies that they are developing on everyone, including those in the rural community.

Within that, you have everything from post office services and transport, as you mentioned, to schooling and the rest of it. The theme is this: all departments develop policies that are well meaning, in best interests and totally understandable. Is there a route by which proper consideration is being given to rural communities when those policies are being developed?

Q40 The Earl of Caithness: I am happy to declare my interest as a member of the Alliance. You mentioned in your introduction that there were problems with affordable rural housing, broadband and other such policies. Where do you think the Government got that wrong in the past? Do you think they have changed, particularly on affordable housing? Have they grasped that there is a problem here, and it is now a question of where you put it rather than accepting that there is a problem?

Tim Bonner: We should take those two questions separately, because there are differences. On affordable housing and some of the issues that we were discussing, the Government consult widely and talk to rural communities and practitioners. We are seeing an understanding develop that there is a problem. Having worked for the alliance for all these years, I have lost count of the number of reports that we have had on affordable rural housing, going from Matthew Taylor backwards. There has been very large number of them. Every time, as far as we can see, the issue is about delivery.

As plenty of research has shown, while government is on side and understands that there is a need, in the nitty-gritty of delivery at the grass roots we are still not where we should be. There is undoubtedly an advocacy role within the rural community. There is a great challenge to differentiate between unsustainable, as it would be seen, and sustainable
development in smaller communities. Even among our membership, I am willing to say that there is a resistance, in some cases, to any development, for fear of communities being swamped and an unsustainable level of development.

We, as an organisation, believe that we have to advocate for that. That is something that the Government also need to do: be bold. If we want all the services that we have talked about, which for us is absolutely key—if we want the village school to be sustained, if we want viable transport services—we have to have a demand for that, and that demand comes from growing communities. In many areas, there is a demand for housing from people who were born and brought up in an area but who cannot afford to live there. By meeting that demand, you potentially resolve a lot of other issues.

**The Countess of Mar:** Is it not a prime example of the failure of the Government’s rural proofing, especially in Defra, because of their requirement to have farmers fill in all their forms on the internet?

**Tim Bonner:** Yes, absolutely.

**The Countess of Mar:** The same applies to the DWP. People living in rural areas are required to fill in their applications online, and they probably do not have access to broadband. There seems to be a failure to understand the importance of these things to people in isolated pockets.

**Tim Bonner:** There is. I would support that point entirely. When the Minister is telling people to go to the library and the nearest library is 25 miles away, that is no answer. The broadband issue is slightly different. It is very complex and technical. The Government should have taken advice from all providers on the rollout to get a better picture of the technical problems of delivering to the last 3%, 4% or 5%. As a result, we have ended up with a scheme that has been delayed and has failed in parts.

Frustratingly, they have not even been able to tell people that they are not going to get decent broadband. If people can just be told that they are not going to get it through BDUK, they can find provision in other areas. We have all sorts of ideas about where that could come from. There is a massive frustration out there that you do not even know whether you are going to get it. We talked about this regularly with the last Minister, who used to quote numbers at me of 96% and 97%. I would say to him, “You understand that every time that number gets bigger, the percentage who do not have it are getting angrier”. They are. It is an incredible frustration.

The most bad-tempered fringe meeting the Countryside Alliance has ever run at a political conference was at, I think, the Conservative Party conference last year or two years ago. We had the managing director of BT Openreach, as it was, in the meeting. It was quite a shock to a lot of the politicians present just how much anger there was about that issue.

**Q41 Baroness Whitaker:** There is clearly a very strong need for rural
advocacy, but where should it, along with advice and monitoring, sit within government? You said that you welcomed the Commission for Rural Communities. Should we have another body like that?

**Tim Bonner:** We welcomed the CRC. We welcomed the rural advocate when it was created and the idea of a strong, independent voice that had the ear of the Prime Minister. At the time, the Prime Minister had taken direct control over the foot and mouth issue, and there was a whole agenda about listening to the countryside. Perhaps, as that faded, it made it more difficult for the rural advocate to have the sort of impact that was considered when the legislation was passed.

That independent advocacy role has been lost. We feel that it is very important for rural communities to have somebody to fight their corner in government. We have the rural ambassador.

**Baroness Whitaker:** You said “in government”. Do you mean independent?

**Tim Bonner:** I mean independent but within the processes of government, which I will perhaps come on to in a moment. We have the rural ambassador at the moment, Lord Gardiner, as a Defra Minister. That has become a slightly different role, I would argue. It could be important, in that as a Defra Minister the rural ambassador has the ear of the Secretary of State. As I said earlier, it is the Secretary of State who has the political lever, at the end of the policy process, to say, “No, you cannot do this because it is going to have a partial impact on rural communities”. That is the wrong end of the process, though. If the Secretary of State is having issues over Cabinet sign-off of a policy that has got to that point, rural proofing has failed because it should have been considered at the start of the policy process and that development.

The idea of having another separate body is not one that we would necessarily support at present. We see perhaps another role, as I said earlier. This role could sit in the Cabinet Office with a full view of policy development across the range of government and with the ability to influence that and point out to all departments that are developing policies, whether the DWP or otherwise, aspects of those policies that may have a differential impact of rural communities. It should also head off any necessity for Secretaries of State to intervene very late in the policy process. We would like to give rural communities that independent champion, sitting within the department and the place where policy is being developed, so they can have an impact. Whatever we say about the CRC, it was not in that place, and it could not have that view.

**Q42 The Earl of Arran:** You and I come from the same part of the world, north Devon, where, thank goodness, my wife is the farmer and not I. I am also a member of your organisation. Very simply, in your opinion do the Government have any idea or perception whatever of a coherent rural vision or strategy?

**Tim Bonner:** As I said earlier, we have concerns that policy is piecemeal and disjointed. For some time, we had Defra working on a 25-year
environment plan and a 25-year food and farming plan. Where is the plan for rural communities? Who is going to deliver these? Is there going to be anyone left? It is of great concern to us that government thinks you can separate out environment policy, farming policy and policy that affects rural communities. You cannot. It is the same thing. We know from north Devon and many other parts of the country that it is a cultural landscape, to use that trendy phrase. It is one thing. You cannot impact on the environment, you cannot improve it and you cannot impact on the way we farm unless you understand the communities and the people who are going to deliver that. We were concerned about that.

As part of the Brexit process, there has to be an understanding that, along with the potential impacts on farming and the environment, there could be massive impacts on those communities. Perhaps that shock to the system has made people start to think more closely about the relationships between all those parts of the countryside. Brexit will be front and centre of the work of this Parliament. In the post-Brexit world, we are seeing Defra produce a more coherent 25-year plan by combining the environment plan and the food and farming plan. We need to have the community aspect in there as well. Without it, who is going to deliver?

**The Earl of Arran:** It seems to me that, as so often, the Government are good at talking the talk and absolutely useless at walking the walk. No comment?

**Tim Bonner:** We all have our views.

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**Baroness Byford:** Many of your members are farmers and have working relationships with Natural England. How successful do you think that has been, and where there have been disadvantages or breakdowns within that system?

**Tim Bonner:** Generally, we were positive and welcomed the creation of Natural England as an adviser to government—we said so at the time of the legislation—because it incorporated all dimensions of land management. It was starting to bring things together, whereas English Nature only looked at the environment aspects and failed to take into account the social and economic pressures of land management.

We believe that land-use policy works only if there is the balance, which we have just been discussing, between social, economic and environment priorities. You will have conflict between the protection of wildlife, the landscape and encouraging outdoor recreation, for instance. We all know that. They all have to be part of the discussion. The Act, in the creation of Natural England, offered greater protection for wildlife and improved habitat protection, but only through enforcement of the existing legislation to ensure better compliance. It could have taken the opportunity to work more closely and push for closer working with local land management communities in better habitats through practical integration on the ground, which should be the key to all these things.
Since the inception, we have been reassured that some of our fears about the Act and the introduction of Natural England were unfounded. NE has corrected some of the fundamental wrongs and fundamental problems with English Nature. Anecdotally, it is widely accepted that there are much better relationships on the ground between Natural England and land managers than there had previously been. There is also a greater balance between the economic and environmental issues, with more working together to achieve outcomes. There are a lot of positives there.

We have had some situations of late payment under the Countryside Stewardship scheme. The process of consultation and amendment of open general licences is of particular concern to us. There is still a taint of top-down direction, but these things are not insoluble. There is a lot to be positive about in the development of Natural England. It continues to move in the right direction in its relationship with land managers and those on the ground.

**Baroness Byford:** We have taken evidence from others who suggest that some of the environmental schemes are too complicated, and there is a fear that some people will not continue to participate. Is that fear being expressed by your organisation?

**Tim Bonner:** It is not Natural England’s decision. Its role is to implement, not to legislate. There is complexity, and post Brexit we have opportunities, which we must take, to look at exactly how all those schemes are implemented and set up. We would always urge simplicity, but understanding that there must also be proper protections to go with that.

From a grass-roots perspective, it is easy to point at Natural England and say, “This is all nonsense. It is too complicated”, and everything else. In the end, it is only down for delivery. I had a rather fraught conversation with the chairman a few weeks ago, because I was quite critical of the development of the coastal access policy from a long time ago. There were comparisons between the policy delivered in Wales, which was delivered very rapidly, and the policy introduced in England, which has understandably taken Natural England a long time to implement.

That is a classic example of a case where Natural England is simply delivering the legislation it was left with. The fact that it is complex and more difficult to deliver than comparable legislation in Wales is simply a product of our politics. It cannot be blamed for the time that has been taken to do that.

**The Earl of Caithness:** What should Natural England’s budget be?

**Tim Bonner:** I am many things; I am not much of a mathematician. I could say something really hopeless like “enough to do the job”. At that point, my knowledge of the accounting of government has reached an end.
In terms of Natural England’s leadership, there are some very talented and able people on the board. I would hope that their voices are heard in government when funding is being discussed, because there are some able people there who would be perfectly able to make a judgment that I cannot.

**Baroness Scott of Needham Market:** I want to reflect on the fact that there is a really broad overall consensus that future agricultural payments should be linked to public goods, such as landscape and biodiversity. Moving from that headline to how it is going to be implemented, I am inviting you to comment, but I would have thought that Natural England would be a big player in how such a scheme was managed and how compliance would be measured. Could you reflect on that, the size of the organisation and whether it can do the job as currently budgeted?

**Tim Bonner:** My colleagues to whom you are going to be talking are in a better position to discuss this, I can assure you. There are some interesting changes, both for Natural England and for Defra. Defra has been a delivery department. It has delivered CAP, et cetera, over the years. It will fundamentally change post Brexit in that it will be necessarily to develop policy as well. Defra’s budget has been cut by 17% in the last few years. There are real issues of resourcing. The Secretary of State assured me not a couple of weeks ago that the department had the resources to deliver, new blood was coming into the department and there was fundamental change there. I am sure that is true of Natural England as well.

On the micro-policy and delivery of whatever agricultural policy we have post 2021, my colleagues at the CLA and the NFU are better placed to deal with that. In general terms, the point is absolutely supported: as Natural England and Defra’s roles develop and change post Brexit, careful consideration will need to be given to their budgets, to ensure they have the resources to deliver the additional roles they will have.

**The Chairman:** Are you suggesting that Natural England is becoming more of an arm of Defra, as opposed to a non-departmental public body? Should it have more independence?

**Tim Bonner:** Again, that is better directed to those more directly involved in agricultural policy. It is incumbent on government to ensure that the resources that the Natural England board requires to deliver the expanded role it will undoubtedly be asked to fulfil are given without feeling that there has to be a strict relationship between cost and how it delivers a role. I am wary of dipping into that for lack of knowledge, but, as you identify, the areas in which Natural England will have to have independence need to be protected.

**Baroness Scott of Needham Market:** We have touched on Brexit a few times. It is the key issue of our time. Thinking in terms of rural communities broadly, as opposed simply to agriculture, what are two key opportunities that Brexit will provide, and what are a couple of threats
that you see?

**Tim Bonner:** I will start by looking at the threats. Our key concern on a landscape scale is about the sustainability of marginal grass farming, upland farming in particular, and the drive from some parts of the political spectrum for significant land use change in those very marginal areas. We know that it is not a straightforward process to subsidise the sort of agriculture that we see in many of our upland communities. It is not simply a matter of income forgone and the usual agri-environmental payment scheme, because in many farming communities incomes are already extremely low. Even significant changes in the way they are farmed would see very little income forgone.

In many of those areas, this is about social payment and whether we want to maintain communities that are sustained by a type of farming and the landscapes that go with them. It is absolutely interconnected; it can be no more interconnected anywhere else than in these areas. In many parts of the country, we have fundamentally changed. I now live in East Anglia, and there is barely a farmer in the parish because, despite being in the countryside, we are not a community that is directly related to farming. That is absolutely not true if you go to north Devon, where I farmed in the past.

In Cumbria, the recent award of UNESCO status to the Lake District is a classic example of how the communities and the practice of farming in that area have created a landscape that is quite extraordinary. We all accept that. How to protect that is a real fear for us. For all sorts of reasons, many of them very good, some of them not, some believe that we should have fundamental change in those areas, and that farming and active management are not necessary of themselves or have a negative environmental impact. There is a potential scenario where you have a double whammy of real problems with subsiding those farms and a significant drive for alternative land use in the same area.

We are very concerned about that and about the wider trade issues for all sorts of industries that would be seen as niche. If I talked to DExEU about the shooting industry, they would probably blank over, but there are 70,000 people employed in the shooting industry in the UK. It is a £2 billion industry and is hugely important in many marginal areas of the countryside. Issues with the import of pheasant and partridge eggs into the UK or the export of shot game from the UK into the European market would cause massive problems in that industry and have a direct knock-on impact on jobs and the rural economy. In this massive discussion about future rural policy, the future of our country and its relationships, these areas, which will be critical to many rural communities, must not be forgotten. Our concern is that they are.

On the more positive side, we have the opportunity to design an agricultural policy, for the first time since nineteen seventy-whenever, that is fit for purpose in the UK and the UK only. That is an extraordinary opportunity and one that we must not waste. Across the board, there is an understanding. Whether I talk to the RSPB or to the NFU, everyone
sees it as an opportunity. Some of them see it as an opportunity for slightly different things, but there is a huge opportunity here.

Ed Davey, a Liberal Democrat Minister in the last Government, was extremely rude about CAP, calling it an instrument of evil at the Liberal Democrat party conference. Has anyone ever argued that CAP was a good thing? It undoubtedly had all sorts of negative consequences. Let us be positive and look at the opportunity to develop a rural policy that is more effective.

**Baroness Scott of Needham Market:** On that question, drawing some of the threads together of what you said before, is there a danger that, if we do not get some of this machinery of government stuff right on where the advocacy sits and how the rural voice is heard, the new vision will end up being flawed because it is made within the existing structures without a broad enough rural voice? Is there a big timing question here?

**Tim Bonner:** Absolutely, yes. It is a critical timing issue, not just short term in the development of policy, but long term in the influence of rural communities in government in the UK. It is one thing going to Brussels with an agricultural and farming lobby beside the French and German farming unions, which are politically extremely powerful. It will be another to make a case in the future for rural communities and the farming community to the Treasury in the UK. As we know, a smaller proportion of our population is actively involved in agriculture than in many other European countries. We are more densely populated and, in simple mathematical terms, rural people and communities have less impact than in other areas in Europe. The post-Brexit advocacy role is significantly more important, because the decisions made in the Treasury in particular are going to have such a huge impact on rural communities.

**The Chairman:** Do you think the Government could answer Lady Scott’s question about having that vision? If I asked the Government, “What is the countryside for?”, do you think they could answer it or have a stab at it?

**Tim Bonner:** I would rather you asked them than me.

**The Chairman:** My impression is that they could not.

**Tim Bonner:** We have to accept—as our membership on the whole, or the progressive element of it, accepts—the public good argument that we cannot see the countryside simply as somewhere for people who live there to enjoy and somewhere to produce food or whatever products are coming out of it. There is a broad acceptance that there is a huge role to provide an environment in which people who do not live in the countryside can come and enjoy any number of separate activities. It is a critical part of the tourism industry and beyond that.

You would hear government Ministers articulating a similar view to me. That has to be delivered in a way that respects the communities that live and work in the countryside, with—importantly in this discussion today—a
cross-government understanding of the impact of policy development in departments other than Defra. You would get the right answer from Defra and, if she was properly briefed, from the Prime Minister, but you would get a blank look from the Home Office.

We had a discussion with a civil servant who had moved to Defra relatively recently and had been working in another department for some time. We mentioned the words “rural proofing” and got a completely blank look. This is someone who had been working in government for a considerable amount of time. It still worries us.

The Home Office is consulting on firearms and knife crime legislation at the moment, which will have a partial impact on many of our members as rural people. At the development stage of that policy, there has been no consideration of the fact that, if I live in a glen in the far north of Scotland and I want to buy a knife for grollicking my deer, which is my job in life, if I have to go to the post office to collect it, it is a 50-mile round trip. They are little things, but in departments like the Home Office they will not cross their thoughts. Is there a way of putting someone in a position where, at an early stage in the development policy process, the impact of these policies on rural communities can be considered?

Q45 **The Earl of Arran:** When farming subsidies were stopped in New Zealand and normal market forces were allowed to take over, what happened?

**Tim Bonner:** You are dragging me back on to agriculture, which, despite being a farmer, I know very little about. I apologise, but that is better pitched at my colleagues. Our strong view would be that if we want to sustain the countryside that we have now, overall levels of support need to be sustained. There are questions about how you deliver that, to which you will get much better answers in your next session. We need to look at these things holistically. That is the one message that needs to be looked at. You cannot think that by deploying clever and trendy environmental policy, for instance, you are going to sustain communities that sustain landscapes that provide massive public goods. We have to take that holistic view.

Q46 **Baroness Parminter:** Can I move you on to the use of public rights of way in the countryside by motor vehicles? How successful do you think the NERC Act was? Are further provisions required?

**Tim Bonner:** The feedback from our membership is that it has worked. Where necessary, the changes that were laid out in NERC have worked and inappropriate use of byways by motor vehicles has been addressed. From our experience over that period, that is one part of the legislation that we can say has been very effective.

Q47 **The Countess of Mar:** What one thing would you like to see the Committee include in the recommendations to the Government in its final report?
**Tim Bonner:** I have two, but I will link them closely. We have talked about this role within the Cabinet Office. We believe that is feasible. Alongside that, there should be an annual debate on the floor of the House to discuss the performance on rural proofing. If we are going to be serious, this phrase was invented 17 years ago. We have been talking about it and there have been all sorts of options for delivering it. Let us be frank: it has not been delivered.

One way of getting every department to address this would be to risk being exposed on the floor of the House and to have an annual debate, where we can look at the performance of the departments, where issues can be raised by MPs about different pieces of legislation that may or may not have been rural proofed and why, if they were not, proper consideration had not been given to the impact of legislation on rural people. The potential for embarrassment in those circumstances would probably have more impact than anything else we have sought to achieve over the last 17 years, as far as rural proofing is concerned.

**The Countess of Mar:** Do you think there is enough expertise in the House of Commons to bring all the flaws out?

**Tim Bonner:** There is an extraordinary range of rural representation in the House of Commons now. I am confident that there are many MPs who would be very keen to ask questions about the development of policy and the impact on their constituents.

**The Chairman:** Thank you very, very much for your long hour of exertions.