Select Committee on the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006

Corrected oral evidence: Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006

Tuesday 14 November 2017
11.05 am

Watch the meeting

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

Evidence Session No. 14 Heard in Public Questions 117 - 126

Witnesses

I: Margaret Clark CBE, Chair, Rural Coalition; Jeremy Leggett, Trustee, Action with Communities in Rural England.
Examination of witnesses

Margaret Clark and Jeremy Leggett.

Q117 **The Chairman:** Welcome to you both, and thank you for coming. 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. Would you introduce yourselves for the record? Feel free to make any introductory remarks, but I suspect that most of the stuff will come out during questions.

**Margaret Clark:** Good morning. I am chair of the Rural Coalition. I also chair the Plunkett Foundation and am a member of the national board of the CPRE, both of which are members of the coalition. I led the team at the Countryside Agency that set up the Commission for Rural Communities. Some of my answers might go back to the past a bit.

**The Chairman:** That is probably what we would like to hear.

**Jeremy Leggett:** I am chief executive of the Sussex Rural Community Council and a trustee of ACRE, the national association of rural community councils. I should make it clear that ACRE and the network of rural community councils have a funding relationship with Defra. ACRE is also a member of the Rural Coalition, which Margaret chairs.

Q118 **The Chairman:** Thank you both very much. My first question is about the Commission for Rural Communities and the extent to which its abolition has led to a breaking up and fragmentation of the rural voice. What are the practical consequences of this?

**Margaret Clark:** Members of the coalition feel quite strongly that there is fragmentation now. The CRC was not perfect and it probably lacked teeth, but it managed to raise the profile of rural issues and brought together a lot of diverse rural interests. Since it went, quite a number of bodies have tried to fill the gap, not least the Rural Coalition, but we have no funding. We are underresourced and rely on voluntary input from members. There is now no one body in the lead to turn to if you want to talk about rural issues. There are various bodies, and it is not coordinated. That has probably led to the rural voice being diminished, overlooked, and often undervalued. The role of watchdog has virtually disappeared, so no one is holding bodies, not just government, to account.

Resourcing is a major issue. At one of its recent meetings, the coalition thought it would be a very good idea to analyse government departments’ annual reports to see whether, across the board, they mention rural matters and what their impact is. However, we have no resource to do that. A body like the Commission for Rural Communities might have done it.
Jeremy Leggett: I agree very much with that. There is no shortage of organisations that will claim to speak for the countryside if asked. Some are well resourced, some have a fairly popular mandate. The Commission for Rural Communities brought a clear balance to the rural voice across England, particularly for people who are more disadvantaged by living in the countryside. It is difficult to replicate that without the statutory power that lay behind the commission. We do not have a fragmented voice of the countryside so much; rather, we have a more partial one, which is based on where the power and influence come from in the organisations that feel they can speak for the countryside.

The Chairman: Is there a single rural voice? Should there not be diverse inputs from lots of different sectors? My impression is that the countryside is diverse in nature, as are its communities.

Jeremy Leggett: I agree. It is extremely diverse. The interests of those for whom living somewhere rural brings a real challenge to their daily lives are not necessarily always going to be the same as those of some others. It would be lovely to have a very co-ordinated voice for the countryside, but it is perhaps more important to have a comprehensive and more broadly encompassing rural policy.

Margaret Clark: Some rural voices are more powerful than others, either because of their constituency or because of their funding, or whatever. As Jeremy says, the voice that historically has not been heard is that of disadvantaged rural communities. The CRC and its predecessors set out to find out more about those voices.

Lord Cavendish of Furness: I have a supplementary question for both witnesses. Reading your fascinating papers, I cannot make out whether you accept that there is an unavoidable trade-off living in the country rather than a town, and where that stops. You cannot expect everyone to have high opera or whatever. Is there a legitimate trade-off?

Margaret Clark: Whether you call it a trade-off or not, I do not think that people who live in the countryside have the same expectations of exactly the same level of services. They do not expect a bus to stop outside the door, or to have Tubes or whatever. But that does not necessarily mean that they should have a very poor quality of service or that services that meet their needs should not be provided in some other ways.

Baroness Scott of Needham Market: We have had quite a number of comments in evidence about the former role of the CRC in the collection of data, which is often very granular, particularly on housing and economic need. There is a lot of concern that this is simply no longer met. Defra has told us that it is not commissioning research. Could you each say something about your observations on the quality and amount of data? Do you have any ideas about how some of the gaps might be filled?
Margaret Clark: I agree. Members of the coalition have said that one of their major concerns is the lack of a body of independent or semi-independent research into rural issues. Others, such as universities and the community interest company Rural England, are trying to do things, but again it is fragmented. There is no forward-looking research programme. The CRC was able to look ahead. For example, not much work had been done on rural disadvantage, but it could see that it was an issue and was able to do a bit of forward planning.

The lack of rural data is worrying. There is no incentive to collect it, and unless there is some impetus behind the need to demonstrate what you are doing in rural areas, you are not going to collect the data. It is a chicken and egg situation. What comes first? What drives that collection? I know that Defra has a statistical digest, and Rural England is trying to produce biennial rural services reports, but only on a few issues. There has been quite a loss there. We would like to see two things. One is a strategic rural research programme. The second is for other government departments’ research programmes to be rural-proofed. Their research ought to look at rural issues. I am sorry for that rather long reply.

Jeremy Leggett: I agree entirely. If you do not recognise that there is a rural dimension to the way services are delivered, you will never collect the data to help you to understand it. I am afraid that that is the situation that we are rapidly getting into.

Baroness Scott of Needham Market: I have lived in and represented a rural area for many years. I suppose some of these issues have always been there. There has always been a sense that nobody understands us. Why is this such an intractable problem for public policy-making?

Jeremy Leggett: It does not need to be intractable. We have just never put sufficient political will behind what we have called rural-proofing over the years, and if you do not do that early enough in the process of developing policy and in the mechanisms for delivering policy, you will always be blind to the rural dimension. If that means that you do not even collect the data about it, you will never even be able to inform yourself about it.

Margaret Clark: We come back to the fact that it is scattered. There was a lovely statistic a few years back that if you put all the people in poverty in rural areas into one place, it would take up an area as big as Birmingham. That becomes a big problem. But because they are scattered and it is not always seen, it just gets ignored in policy-making.

The Chairman: Are you aware of Defra doing any analysis at all, on affordable housing for example?

Margaret Clark: It produces statistical research, and it has just strengthened its team to do more work on data analysis and research, but I do not know the detail.

Q120 Lord Faulkner of Worcester: I think the answer to my question will be
no from both of you, but I will ask it all the same. Do you feel that sufficient support is available for the rural economy following the ending of the Countryside Agency and the regional development agencies? Secondly, do you have a view on the value of the new structures, particularly the local enterprise partnerships, which have come into being since the passage of the Act?

Jeremy Leggett: You are right to anticipate that our answer would be no. We asked our network of 38 rural community councils their view on this area, and the response, particularly to LEPs as the inheritor of some of what the RDAs did in the past, has been that LEPs seem focused on urban outcomes. In the main, the reason given tends to be that their tasking from the centre seems to lead them into that; they are looking for major economic, major housing and transport interventions in urban areas, which simply do not apply to, play well to or compare well with rural development.

Lord Faulkner of Worcester: Do they actually work against the interests of rural areas?

Jeremy Leggett: Yes, inasmuch as the intervention is focused on urban areas. Whether they actively work against them is hard to say. Of course, at the moment we still have the LEPs’ involvement, at least indirectly, in the remaining few years of the EU programmes, so we are still going through the final few years of the EAFRD and LEADER programmes. Clearly, we need to make sure that rural considerations come into the thinking about what might replace those in a few years’ time.

Margaret Clark: On LEPs, to be fair, one or two have demonstrated a concern for rural areas. There are examples in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire of dedicated rural groups being put together and rural stakeholder meetings, but the generality of what Jeremy says is true. One problem is that the Countryside Agency and the RDAs managed to get a better understanding of the rural economy, but we seem to have slid back into the view that it is about farm diversification, food and tourism, when actually the rural economy is extremely diverse. It mirrors the urban economy, except in some things like land use, and it has fewer financial services. But its real difference is the heavy dependence on small and very small firms. All the programmes of support to business, even to bigger small firms—I am talking about micro-firms with fewer than 10 employees—are about concentrating in urban centres. We have lost that sense of what the rural economy is about.

The really big loss from losing the Countryside Agency and RDAs is in support for market towns. There was a very good market towns programme and a body called Action for Market Towns, which was making some in-roads into revitalising market towns. That seems to have simply slipped away.

Lord Faulkner of Worcester: Would you like to see the RDAs return, not that that is on offer?
Margaret Clark: I am not into reinventing things or going back into the past. I would have liked to see the good things that they did being vested in other bodies. What kind of body that is is not a matter for me. It is about what they did and the knowledge that they built up.

Lord Cavendish of Furness: I am under the impression that support for LEPs and local government is often conditional on the reform of local government. How much do you think that process is holding up support for understanding rural issues?

Margaret Clark: I am not an expert on that local-government angle.

Jeremy Leggett: It is a very interesting question. One person’s reform may be someone else’s something different. As a network of charities working very closely with local government, we see that a lot of local government has moved very strongly to a commissioning model, whereby it delivers very little itself but commissions from others. That has reduced local authorities’ memory and knowledge of their area, or their experience of delivery does not fit well with a very straightforward procurement process. There is something in what you say, but I am not so sure that the requirement for reform has such a direct influence on what has happened to rural areas. Other things have driven that.

Lord Cavendish of Furness: The word “leadership” has not come up so far, but that is where the big vacuum seems to be.

Margaret Clark: Apart from reform happening, lots of local authorities, particularly smaller rural authorities, are sharing services. We have seen quite major cuts in staff across discretionary services and have heard anecdotal stories, such as one person having to cover the whole county to do whatever. When facing some of the cuts and the austerity measures, it is quite difficult to provide leadership in those circumstances; it is about plugging holes, quite often.

Baroness Byford: Good morning to you both. In addition to my declared interests, I should declare two things at this meeting: I am a vice-president of Leicestershire & Rutland Rural Community Council and secretary of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services, so I will not be able to take part in the second stage of the meeting, but I can take part at this stage.

The evidence that we have received from various people giving evidence to us has shown that the economic needs of rural areas are not taken account of properly, particularly in the Government’s industrial strategy, which was launched earlier this year. You have spoken about the commissioning angle for local authorities, and I totally follow you along that line. Are there other ways in which we could be more supportive or ways in which things could be done differently, without looking over our shoulder all the while?

Margaret Clark: The industrial strategy Green Paper, if I may say so, was a missed opportunity. That is a personal view. It is a Green Paper, it is broad brush and it is for consultation, but it says very little about rural;
it is very urban and business-focused. Yes, it says that it wants to drive growth across the whole country, but it does not say how it is going to do that. Because it is a Green Paper, we all have an opportunity to influence the next stage, but for me that is almost too late; you are trying to influence thinking that has already been done, and maybe tinker a bit, rather than being at the heart of it.

It would be very useful as part of that to have some kind of rural economic strategy. I know that a few years back Defra did a rural productivity plan, but I sense that has slid a bit and is being overtaken by the industrial strategy. So it would be really good to do that. Defra is also planning a 25-year environment plan, but we do not know where the rural economy sits within that.

So there are opportunities to address some of those questions at a national level, and we need to be careful that that happens. I do not know whether that happens at the local level.

Jeremy Leggett: I agree with all that. It is probably worth reflecting that, even on the most generous measure, less than 10% of the employment in rural areas is in agriculture, land-based industries or industries downstream from there. For much of rural England, the fastest-growing sector is home-based business, which is very flexible, very fleet of foot, and often trades globally from someone’s living room. We seem to fail to recognise the extent to which this is driving the economy in rural areas or to make it more possible for that kind of very small business to grow and develop in an appropriate way.

Baroness Byford: I am very grateful to you for raising that, because this obviously goes back to one of our earlier problems: broadband. Where good broadband is active it is possible for that to happen, but it is much more difficult when it is not. Some 50% of small and medium-sized businesses are now based in rural areas.

May I take you back to the LEPs, please? Things in the paper suggest that Leicestershire is one county where someone in a rural area can apply if they wish. Is there some way in which we could help other areas that do not realise that LEP money is available to them?

Jeremy Leggett: Certainly in the future, once LEADER and some of the other EU-related programmes have finished, it would be a huge benefit if the tasking and directing of LEPs could encourage them to balance the large-scale interventions—which may have plenty of good PR spin-offs—with smaller economic developments in rural areas that would support home-based small and micro-businesses.

The Countess of Mar: Do you think there is information failure among the people who produce these Green Papers? In other words, do they have no experience themselves of the countryside and of people working in it, so it does not enter their heads that these should be involved?
Margaret Clark: We in the Countryside Agency often used to say that one of the difficulties was that policymakers were, on the whole, embedded in London and very urban centric. I come back to there being no real understanding of the rural economy. Quite a lot of people who are developing these policies—with the best will in the world—think of rural as farming, horticulture and environment. That is what they see. They see the drivers of the economy as large businesses, whereas that is not always the case. The contribution to the national economy from small, rural businesses is huge.

Q122 The Countess of Mar: To what extent have funding cuts to local authorities and government agencies intensified the problems associated with the rural premium: in other words, the additional cost of delivering services in sparsely populated areas? Have rural areas suffered disproportionately as a result of public sector budget reductions?

Jeremy Leggett: It has certainly been our experience that reductions in local government budgets have had a definite and greater effect on rural areas. Local authorities will tend to look to ways of assessing needs, particularly using things like the index of multiple deprivation and the joint strategic needs assessment, which are very weighted towards relative deprivation within geographical areas, not towards the needs of individuals and families. An increasing proportion of the budget tends to get focused on an ever-reducing number of wards that are identified as being those most in need. That detracts from the resources going to other places.

If I may, I will give a little illustration. Imagine a few drops of red ink dropped on to a white bathroom floor. You can see where they are and be able to wipe them up relatively easily. You can target your efforts to get rid of them. If you were to drop the same amount of red ink into a swimming pool, you would not be aware that it was there. If you were aware and needed to get rid of it, it would be a time-consuming and difficult process. That is the difference between disadvantage in urban locations and rural ones. That is how local government tends to target when it is short of resources.

We are aware of one or two local authorities that have included rural impact assessments in their policy development at the same time as equality impact assessments. However, as budgets reduce, the feedback is increasingly that that is becoming a formulaic process, with officers simply advising their members: “If we had some more money we could do something about it”. Even if you have such a rural-proofing approach in policy formulation, you still have to make relative decisions about targeting resources. In the experience of our network, the targeting tends to be in urban areas of concentrated disadvantage.

Margaret Clark: It is important to add that the cuts have been made across all types of authority nationally. Rural authorities have not necessarily been singled out. Of course, they started from a lower base. They get less funding per capita to begin with, and people in rural areas have fewer services. When you cut, you are cutting from a very low base.
Even if the cut is 10% across the country as a whole, it has a disproportionate effect, even if the cut is not disproportionate.

The evidence that we in the coalition have been getting is that things such as adult social care and bus services have been particularly hard hit. Some local authorities have withdrawn all bus subsidies. In an urban area, quite a lot of the bus services are commercially run and are subsidised only in part. However, in most rural areas bus services get a subsidy. If you take that away, you lose the service.

**Baroness Scott of Needham Market:** I am not sure where else to ask this question, so I will ask it at this point. At home in Suffolk, I think I am seeing an increase in what one might call civil society stepping in. In some cases, there is no choice because councils decide to divest—that is the word they are all using—themselves of services and communities and charities step in. What are your thoughts on the role of civil society in all this? Do you see more activity, or is it also struggling under financial pressures.

**Margaret Clark:** Jeremy will have a lot more information on that than I have. I will put my Plunkett Foundation hat on. We support community enterprises and are certainly seeing a lot more interest. Shops have been bought for some time, but communities are buying their pubs and looking at lots of different ways of providing local services. There are organisations, not least Jeremy’s one, which are there to help, but they are also underresourced. On the one hand, there is the really positive move of people wanting to help themselves, but there is a lot of rediscovering the wheel because there is no support mechanism to help them to do that; it is underresourced and has been cut. If there were some way of funding that and resourcing it better, you could make a thousand flowers bloom.

**Jeremy Leggett:** I am grateful to Margaret for saying what I wanted to say. If I had said it, it would have sounded like special pleading. Civic society has always stepped in in rural areas. That lovely hall in your village is not run by the local authority but by volunteers. Volunteers already run the car scheme and the good neighbourhood scheme. The trick that we need to turn to help civic society to deal with the reductions in statutory service provision is finding some way of helping the statutory services to break down the silos between themselves. They always, instinctively, look for economies of scale for their particular service. You can get that in the London Borough of whatever; the service can have its own building, staff, infrastructure and all that. In a rural area you cannot get that, so you need services to work together, and you need economies of scope.

That is exactly what happens with village halls. In a town, you would have a theatre, a leisure centre, childcare facilities. In a village, the village hall does all those things, which are run by volunteers. So you have to leverage all that, but you have to get the statutory sector to work with you, breaking down its silos so that things can have sustainable economies of scope. In that way, you can get more involvement from
civic society and potentially motivate people to do things for their community.

Lord Cavendish of Furness: The flip side to Baroness Scott’s observation on civil society, and I find this in Cumbria, is that people, particularly farmers, are being driven out and are leaving parish councils and governing bodies mainly because of the rules and regulations, and in particular the disproportionate effect of regulation. Have you observed any of that?

Jeremy Leggett: We hear that all the time, but one never really knows whether people would have got involved and volunteered if it were not for a certain amount of regulation—and there is a certain amount of regulation that you really would not want not to have. Ten years ago we heard rural childcare and youth organisations say, “We’re going to lose all our volunteers if you introduce DBS checks and the like”. We all accept that that has to happen, and it is now part of the fabric of the way in which people get involved. We gave evidence to the Select Committee on Citizenship and Civil Engagement on this very subject, because it looked as if that Committee’s remit was not looking as closely at this side of rural life as it might have done. We have included as an appendix to our evidence to you our submission to that Committee.

The Countess of Mar: Following on from Baroness Scott’s question, the evidence from one of you—I cannot remember which—talks about adult social care and how it is let out to big organisations. In the village where I live, there are some retired district nurses who could quite happily organise people in our own locality to provide adult social care. It seems to me that that would be an economy to the local authority, but it is not looking at it that way. Do you agree?

Jeremy Leggett: Absolutely, but that could happen only if those services were procured in a way that had been rural-proofed and that looked at the best way of delivering those services in a rural area, rather than a reform of local government and the health system ending up in larger and larger commissioning areas for largescale organisations to deliver within, making it very difficult for more appropriate local approaches, as you describe, to happen in a given small locality.

The Countess of Mar: In a lot of cases, these women are on a minimum wage and they have to pay for their travelling time out of it. That seems very uneconomic.

Jeremy Leggett: Indeed.

Margaret Clark: We at the Plunkett Foundation have found that quite a lot of shops and pubs are providing a social care service for people. It is informal and not recognised, but there are people in the village who they know are not well, need help or whatever, who come in because they are isolated. That is not recognised in the whole scheme of things, so if they are looking at raising money it comes either from the village or from a
traditional shop grant or pub grant. The wider role that they are performing is simply not recognised.

**Q123 Baroness Whitaker:** This is slightly a devil’s-advocate question. Is it realistic to expect government policy to be rural-proofed? What are the challenges that currently limit the potential for rural-proofing, and how might these be overcome? Ms Clark mentioned public transport. There is a huge deficit of rural public transport that impedes business, access to services and indeed getting on with life, and I would be interested in your views on what the Government should do.

**Margaret Clark:** I do not see why it is not realistic to expect the Government to be concerned with all their citizens, wherever they live. Geography should not be the determinant of whether or not your interests are looked after. They need to understand—call it rural-proofing or whatever—what it is like to live and work in a rural area. For me, rural-proofing is not only realistic but important. After all, the Government do equality and environmental impact assessments. As we have already discussed, there are challenges to how you do that, certainly to how central government does that because of its very nature.

We come back to the data issue, which again is a chicken-and-egg question: if you want to drive it by saying, “We want to understand what is happening in rural areas and how it impacts on rural citizens”, that will drive the data. The two are very intertwined.

It also means recognising that the expertise is not just within government. Civil servants move around, maybe every couple of years. They have a wealth of knowledge and expertise but probably not a huge amount of rural experience or expertise, so you need to bring in people who have that expertise. That means having a process that is more transparent. Rather than producing a policy that is nicely tied up in ribbons and saying, “Here it is”, and those of us in the rural world saying, “Argh, but it doesn’t work”, there is a need to involve people earlier on in the development of the policy, even before it is a policy. It is about engaging. It is not always clear or obvious whether things have been rural-proofed. They may well have gone through a process, but that is not said.

**Jeremy Leggett:** I could not put it any better. The second part of your question was: what are the impediments? I would say political will. Perhaps there should be statutory backing in some form. We do equalities impact assessments for all policy, and we take that extremely seriously. I do not see why someone, by dint of the geography of where they live, should be seriously disadvantaged in their access to services that the rest of society gets. If you live in a rural area, as we said earlier, you expect to be a little bit disadvantaged—no one expects there to be a district general hospital in every market town—but you should not be seriously disadvantaged. That is perhaps where we ought to put the cut and ensure that everything is rural-proofed to avoid that.

**Baroness Whitaker:** What do you think about another impediment?
Where I live, people respond very well, in all the ways that have been discussed, when it comes to services and so on, but on the whole these are only the people who are better off. For various reasons, poor people, who are the most disadvantaged by the lack of rural-proofing, do not quite latch on to how to make it work better. Do you think the Government ignore poorer people? What is all this about?

**Jeremy Leggett:** I hesitate to put it as crudely as this, but it is a question of “out of sight, out of mind”.

**Baroness Whitaker:** Yes, but this is a democracy. Why are they out of sight?

**Jeremy Leggett:** Because of where they live.

**Lord Cavendish of Furness:** May I make a rather raw suggestion: that there are fewer MPs than ever who understand the nature of the countryside? Do you agree?

**Margaret Clark:** MPs come from a wide range of backgrounds.

**Lord Cavendish of Furness:** Well, do they?

**Margaret Clark:** I think they come from a wide range of backgrounds, from what I can tell. To overcome some of those issues, there are groupings in Parliament—Baroness Byford mentioned one—and elsewhere that are about trying to understand the issues of rural areas. It is inevitable that some Members of Parliament who do not come from a rural background represent a rural constituency, but my experience of working with MPs is that they go out of their way to try to find out about issues affecting their constituents.

Q124  **Lord Cavendish of Furness:** That is very reassuring.

My main question is directed initially at Mr Leggett. Your written evidence, which I found tremendously readable if I may say so, calls for responsibility for rural policy to be moved from Defra to the Cabinet Office. Not everybody feels that that is necessarily the holy grail. How would you ensure that such an approach did not create further fragmentation between rural policy and policy on agriculture and the environment, and what are the benefits of your suggestion overall?

**Jeremy Leggett:** I would like to put that proposal into context, if I may. Our view, which has probably come across in the past three-quarters of an hour or so, is that we need a comprehensive rural policy for rural people in England, not just a policy for farming and a policy for the environment. That means something that is then implemented by the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department of Health, the Department for Communities and Local Government, DCMS, all the others. Obviously fragmentation is a worry, but we have no policies for rural areas at all across those areas of government, other than what those individual departments might choose to do, so that fragmentation is already there.
If Defra were empowered by the centre to take that role, I would have no problem with that. The issue is that it needs to be a comprehensive, cross-cutting government policy on rural areas that is then implemented across all departments and policed across all departments. If Defra can do that, fine, but that has not been the case over 16 years of Defra and eight Secretaries of State, presumably because Defra has not been empowered to do so. We already have fragmentation between all the social and economic policies and the policies that Defra is in command of on food, farming and the environment.

On the question of an alternative way of doing it, if we go back 100 years to the equivalent, the Rural Development Commission, its origins were actually in the Treasury. So it is not beyond the scope of the machinery of government to put the responsibility for a genuine cross-cutting rural policy somewhere where it can be implemented across all of government. If Defra is the right place for that, that is fine. We have a close working relationship with Defra, and I would not want to sully that in any way, but we need a policy for rural people and rural communities that goes across government, not something that is just subsidiary to farming and environmental policy.

Lord Cavendish of Furness: Ms Clark, how do you react to the Cabinet Office idea, or indeed to the Treasury idea?

Margaret Clark: One problem that can arise wherever it sits is that other government departments see it as Defra's job: “It has rural affairs in its title. Therefore, it does rural. We do what we do”—work and pensions or whatever. We moved around. I worked for the Rural Development Commission when it was under the Treasury. Then we went to the Department of the Environment, then to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, and then to Defra. If you remember, there was a rural White Paper in 1995, which was led by the Secretary of State for the Environment, John Gummer—Lord Deben as he is now—who undertook to “expand the remit of the Cabinet Committee on the Environment so that its task will be continually to consider the rural dimension of policy-making right across Whitehall”. That was the birth of rural-proofing.

It is about having something that, as Jeremy says, enables the strings to be pulled. It is about having the political will at the heart of government that means that rural issues matter across the board. Whether or not you have a lead department, as there is on welfare, on business or whatever, does not seem to me to matter that much, as long as you have that cross-Whitehall chivvying.

Q125 The Earl of Arran: As ever, we come to Brexit. Brexit tally ho! What in your opinions are the potential implications for rural businesses and communities? In your opinion, what should we do to ensure that any opportunities, which must exist, are realised, and the potential threats, which also must exist, are mitigated?

Margaret Clark: The Rural Coalition was concerned about the impact of Brexit on rural communities, which led to our publishing a statement in
the summer. Our main concern was that the debate seemed to centre on farming and the environment, both of which are critical, and we have farming and environmental interests on the Rural Coalition. But the bit in the middle is being squeezed. Rural communities and businesses not directly involved in those things did not seem to have a voice. Yet the whole of rural England, like the whole of England, wherever you are geographically, will be affected by withdrawing from the EU. Our main concern is making sure that the implications of the negotiations for rural people and businesses and post-Brexit policies are properly rural-proofed. That was our main desire. At another level, this also comes back to the need to have a strong rural voice in those negotiations.

The Earl of Arran: Mr Leggett, do you share that view?

Jeremy Leggett: I am entirely in accord with that view.

The Earl of Arran: Is there any evidence that more and more people wish to move from the towns to the country, to rural communities, or does the evidence not exist because it is not true?

Margaret Clark: I think it has slowed, although I need to check the figures. I think there is still an outward migration, but it may be more to the smaller market towns than to the deep rural areas. There is a flow of middle-aged or older people moving out of towns and cities and younger people moving in. I know that you are going on to talk about housing, which is at the heart of quite a lot of that. There is still a desire to live in the countryside, but I have not looked at the figures lately and I would have to write to you on that.

Q126 The Chairman: One final question: what one recommendation would you like us to put in our report?

Margaret Clark: I would like you to give rural-proofing some welly—really give it some teeth—and for rural-proofing to be made more transparent and real across government. I am less concerned about the organisational thing. We need to follow the principle that rural-proofing happens and happens early on in policy-making, at all levels. We are focusing on the national level, but it needs to happen down the line, with anyone who delivers services to the public.

The Earl of Arran: Are you sceptical about what is happening?

Margaret Clark: There are some good things happening and possibly not such good things happening. We had a meeting recently with the DCLG team, which is doing the Fair Funding review of local government finance. I was very encouraged by how it was looking at rural issues. Perhaps it can get beneath some of this IMD stuff and look at the impacts on rural communities. That is encouraging. But at other times you look at what is happening and you think that it is less so. So there is good and bad.

Lord Faulkner of Worcester: This is a left-field question. You have made quite a lot of the fact that people who live in cities do not fully understand the needs of people in rural areas, and I would certainly
agree with you. Four and three-quarter million of them listen weekly to a radio show that is supposed to be a portrait of country life. Do you think that “The Archers” encourages an understanding of life in the country, or does it hinder it?

**Margaret Clark:** That really is left-field. I gave up listening to “The Archers” about 10 years ago when I moved to the countryside.

**Jeremy Leggett:** I stopped listening in April 1992.

I would like to see a comprehensive cross-government policy towards rural communities that is established and policed from the heart of government somehow—I am open to how—but with the aim of ensuring that no one is seriously disadvantaged by the geography of where they live. They will accept being a little disadvantaged, but nobody should be seriously disadvantaged by the geography of where they live.

**The Chairman:** We will keep trying. Some of us have been trying for decades. Thank you both very much.