Select Committee on the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006

Corrected oral evidence: The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006

Tuesday 28 November 2017

11.05 am

Watch the meeting

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

Evidence Session No. 19 Heard in Public Questions 158 - 167

Witnesses

I: Merrick Denton-Thompson OBE, President, Landscape Institute; Rebecca Hughes, Policy & Influencing Officer, Landscape Institute.
Examination of witnesses

Merrick Denton-Thompson OBE and Rebecca Hughes.

Q158 The Chairman: Good morning 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 and a transcript will be taken and published on the Committee website. You will have the opportunity to make corrections to that transcript where necessary. Would you like to introduce yourselves for the record, although I am quite happy for everything to come out in the questions?

Merrick Denton-Thompson: Thank you very much indeed for inviting the Landscape Institute to present evidence today. Perhaps I may introduce our policy director, Rebecca Hughes, who is here to ensure that I make sense and answer your questions appropriately. The relevant background is that I was a board member of Natural England from 2006 to 2009. I sat on the cross-compliance board representing the Local Government Association and I directed the rural pathfinder for the south-east of England. I also served on Jane Brown’s agri-environment review group, which set up the environmental stewardship scheme. I have a long history of working in both the public sector and the voluntary sector.

Q159 The Chairman: Thank you very much. From your written evidence you say that Natural England seems to have lost its landscape capabilities. You also say that some of the work of the Countryside Agency was specifically removed from the work of Natural England. Can you tell us what Natural England does well vis-à-vis the landscape and what it does less well? What was the Countryside Agency doing that Natural England is not doing now?

Merrick Denton-Thompson: Members of the Committee will recall the setting up of Natural England by bringing together the Rural Development Service, English Nature and the Countryside Agency. The Countryside Agency pioneered new ideas. It was deeply involved in innovation and establishing guidance, but a lot of that work has been lost.

I would point to two or three things in Natural England’s performance. It has been outstanding at the coalface and its field staff are working collaboratively with the farming industry, which has been so successful that I do not believe the centre really understands the public goods that are being delivered through the relationship. Certainly in its new strategy I urged the chairman to make sure that he could capture all the coalface experience being gathered at the time. The field staff of Natural England are a national resource, because they have such a good working relationship.

On the question of its other activities, Natural England has been very pioneering in making the national character area assessments and the new map of England, which establishes 159 different national character areas. Perhaps I may add that if we are going to have an overarching policy for managing the countryside, which I hope we will end up with,
we have no single vision for what we want out of a multifunctional countryside, but we desperately need one to sit beside our spatial planning mechanisms. However, it needs to be articulated at the landscape scale because its work, which is basically about mapping the interaction between human activity and natural systems—those of soil, climate, geology, topography and ecosystems—is crucial to setting the national agenda at the landscape scale, which can then be delivered much more easily. Natural England has undertaken that work, which is money in the bank in terms of public investment, and it has produced an extremely up-to-date framework for the agenda that the Committee is considering today.

The Chairman: What did you mean when you said in your written evidence that from the outset there was a clear strategy for removing much of the valuable work being undertaken by the Countryside Agency? You have talked about a very good relationship being fostered with farmers. Is that vis-à-vis the environment and habitats and that landscape has got lost in that? It is quite difficult to deal with landscape when you are talking to farmers.

Merrick Denton-Thompson: The rural strategy was quite clear that Natural England had a responsibility for ecosystems and biodiversity as well as a responsibility for landscape. When we look at the way Natural England was set up and the presence of technical staff, the landscape element of the Countryside Agency failed to survive those changes. At the time I had a conversation with Lord Haskins, who did not know who I was, at a lunch where Henry Smith MP was our host. Lord Haskins was very clear that there was a need to remove the Countryside Agency and the landscape element. I never understood why and I did not have a chance to ask him that specific question. The answers I had back from Richard Wakeford, who was the last chief executive of the Countryside Agency, frankly did not hold water, so I will not repeat them in this forum.

The Countess of Mar: The Landscape Institute has suggested that Natural England had annually lost scientific expertise and funding to the extent that it has become unwilling to formulate national policies to secure the conservation and enhancement of the landscape. Does Natural England have access to sufficient scientific expertise to allow it to fulfil its statutory objectives?

Merrick Denton-Thompson: I believe not, because from the outset there was a very ambitious plan to set up Natural England as an arm’s-length government organisation that was going to have a scrutiny function and indeed have the scientific and research resources upon which it could then recommend policy development within Defra and the Government as a whole.

However, over time that strength of purpose has gradually been reduced. I am afraid there was a moment when the establishment was a bit upset by an intervention by the chief executive and indeed the chairman; I will hold both to account since I was on the board. An announcement was
made at the NFU annual conference—the Committee will see the point in a moment—that Natural England was going to change the policy for environmental stewardship by raising the bar on entry level and to stipulate that the higher levels of stewardship would be by invitation only. In other words, it was total state control. That was not the intention of Ministers at the time. I can repeat the following because a director-general in Defra, Peter Unwin, confirmed it for me only a year ago that that event still resonates within Defra. The fact was that Defra had no knowledge that the statement was going to be made; nor, indeed, had Ministers.

Moreover, I have to say that as the board members we had no knowledge that the announcement was going to be made. It might sound like a minor event, but it was critical to Natural England’s relationship with the National Farmers’ Union, the Country Land and Business Association and the farming industry. We should bear in mind the proposal at the time that we should try to capture 70% of all land into the environmental stewardship programme. The idea, put without consultation, of raising the bar on entry level and by invitation only was a dramatic statement that had repercussions.

As a direct result of that, Natural England lost its policy director and chief scientist, Dr Tom Tew. So I would say that the science base and the policy development was radically reduced and that there was a distinct change of climate in which Natural England was reminded that it was a delivery agent only. That marked a moment when suddenly the fortunes of the organisation changed.

The Countess of Mar: Are you saying that cuts have had an effect on the capacity of Natural England to provide bespoke scientific advice about landscape and biodiversity?

Merrick Denton-Thompson: Yes, I am. At the outset, Natural England’s overall budget was £200 million a year in grant in aid while this year it is £80 million. It had 2,000 staff, which has now reduced to 1,600. It was inevitable, when bringing three government agencies together, that enormous economies could be made, so there was a moment when all the duplication of administration and electronic systems was cut out. A disciplined approach was taken to formulating the establishment of Natural England, but that seemed to be forgotten almost immediately in the drive to carry on reducing, reducing, reducing. The organisation was already fit for purpose in 2006, but there was a continuation of driving forward economies and reducing resources.

Baroness Byford: I would like greater clarification. Who made the announcement at that stage at the NFU conference?

Merrick Denton-Thompson: That was Helen Phillips, the chief executive of Natural England.

Baroness Byford: But the board members had no idea that that was going to happen.
**Merrick Denton-Thompson:** I will tell you the exact story. I was a board member, and Helen Phillips was very proud to announce that the NFU had invited her to give the keynote speech. I have worked with the NFU for many years, and I offered her my support. We had a board meeting not a week before her crucial speech. She had promised to show me a draft of it and I told her that I could contribute and help her. I had an email on the day she was to give her presentation in which she said, "I'm about to give my speech. You'll have a copy of it when I have given it". So the board had a meeting not a week before, but not a whisper of such a dramatic change in policy was given to us. I subsequently raised this with the chairman, because I did not feel that I was doing my job because I had no idea as a board member that such a dramatic change of policy was about to be announced. It turned out, which I did not know, that Ministers felt exactly the same.

**Baroness Byford:** Could I clarify something else? I should declare that I am a member of the NFU and I was probably at that conference, although I cannot remember. I queried the point, because we are looking at whether Natural England works well, and if, as your example suggests, things did not work as they might and might have worked better, that is certainly of concern to me; I do not know whether it is of concern to other colleagues here. Although this is slightly away from what we are discussing, it is hugely important, because you are talking about a standalone body that should be governed in a proper manner, and clearly there was a question mark at that moment. I will put it to bed there, but it raises other issues which I do not think are covered by questions later. I hope I am right.

Q161 **The Earl of Arran:** Your written evidence suggested that Natural England’s status has “incrementally diminished” in recent years. How does this affect its ability to carry out its role as effectively? Does Natural England have sufficient independence from the Government to perform its role?

**Merrick Denton-Thompson:** I do not believe it has, in the light of the way I answered the previous question. It was reminded very strongly that it is a delivery agent only, so the policy development and the scientific work were put to one side and it delivered government policy as the Government’s agent. So my personal view is no. I would hate the Committee to judge Natural England’s performance based on one historical event like that. All the personalities have changed, and the board, I am sure, is now very effective. Certainly I see what is happening at the coalface, particularly through the field staff, what they are delivering and their relationship with the farming industry as immensely positive, and I do not think the public have any real idea of what is being achieved with the farming industry. That is a bit of an issue.

I believe you are about to hear evidence from Andrew Sells, the chairman of Natural England. I would commend its new strategy, because it is very much about capturing the spirit of the new agenda, which is about natural capital and working collaboratively with the farming industry to move towards a more sustainable approach to food production.
The Chairman: What about the independence from government bit? Does it still hold good that it has no independence, really?

Merrick Denton-Thompson: I am afraid that I do not believe it has the independence. That is my observation, based on what has happened since 2009.

Lord Cavendish of Furness: In a public body, is it a zero-sum game that if you fund less you will get less, or can you get more out of less by clever reorganisation?

Merrick Denton-Thompson: I do not think that funding is necessarily the doorway to efficient working. I mentioned that there was a huge, disciplined approach to setting up Natural England at the outset to make the very best of public investment. Subsequently, it was given the task of delivering the first round of the environmental stewardship programme, and we should bear in mind that 70% of farmers, for example, were targeted in that round—and we are talking about a farming community of about 225,000 at the moment. Inevitably, in order to have a collaborative relationship with that number of the farming community it is important to have the right level of staffing to connect in a collaborative way.

If we had a clearer public agenda and could perhaps work more collaboratively with the farming industry and the voluntary sector, I suspect that we could do more for less, especially at the moment, given that so much of our administration with the farming industry is about distributing European money, and the problems of disallowance have created a totally dysfunctional relationship with the farming industry, on the basis that every farmer is potentially a fraudster.

Surely in this day and age we have to move beyond that. We have a large force in the RPA, which is inspecting every nook and cranny of farmers’ work, and I do not think that is necessary. That is completely the wrong relationship to have with the farming industry.

Q162 Lord Faulkner of Worcester: You talk in your written evidence about where the rural affairs brief should be handled in government. We are getting differing views in the written evidence that we receive. Some say that it should be handled by Defra, some say it should be the DCLG, and some say it should be the Cabinet Office. Could you explain to us why you think it should be largely transferred from Defra to DCLG, and what the practical effects of that change would be?

Merrick Denton-Thompson: This is not a major part of our evidence; I just make that point. From my experience of working in the public sector, I would say that the whole process of rural-proofing is happening at local authority level, and there are some excellent examples of that. I suppose we go back to principles: why would you treat one part of society differently from another, and are you not missing a trick if you do not see the whole of society as one target audience? It is the responsible public-sector approach to ensure that the opportunities are there for everybody,
and part of the rural-proofing exercise is to ask whether we are serving our rural communities as well as our urban communities. I know that work is going on at the moment.

It therefore seemed right and proper to us that DCLG have the responsibility for rural affairs and that Defra should concentrate very much on the priorities of sustainable food production and the environment, because we think that is a challenge enough. In a way, it is diluting the effort and the perseverance of Defra to pursue those objectives by also having to deal with rural affairs and rural communities. Please do not get me wrong: of course rural communities desperately need the right services from the public sector, and it is no part of our argument that either society should be treated differently.

**Lord Faulkner of Worcester:** What about the view that has been put to us that it is all too difficult for DCLG or Defra and that it would be more happily situated inside the Cabinet Office?

**Merrick Denton-Thompson:** Perhaps some form of scrutiny role, in making sure that rural communities are properly served, might be reported back to the Cabinet Office. That is probably a good idea, primarily because we tend to work in silos, and it is not until you get to the Cabinet Office that you get that strength of purpose that makes all the connections. But I would not suggest that it is a huge bureaucracy. There may be an executive connection, but I believe that the DCLG is the right department to run that particular service.

**Baroness Whitaker:** Moving on, I would like to ask Miss Hughes, in view of her architectural background, about the socio-economic aspect. The Landscape Institute is notable for taking the broadest possible view of the importance of landscape. It would be helpful for us to know, following the demise of the Countryside Agency, and the subsequent abolition of the Commission for Rural Communities and the regional development agencies, is sufficient attention being given by the Government to the socio-economic needs of communities that support valued landscapes? Are any new measures required to improve the support given to rural communities?

**Rebecca Hughes:** There is a lot in those questions, and I will take them in stages. First, on whether the function of the Countryside Agency has been carried forward, in my experience—I have had experience of working with the Countryside Agency and in another agency, in another part of the UK, in Scotland—no, it has not continued on from where it was before Natural England came to be.

It is a long time since I was with Scottish Natural Heritage—10 years or more—but I have kept in touch with it in the policy role that I now have. I also have connections with Northern Ireland and Wales. There is some considerable concern that the leadership role that the Countryside Agency provided at one stage in the landscape arena, even if it has not been lost completely, is in a lesser capacity than it was. That is a great loss. Many professionals in the public and private sectors, and in the developing
community, miss this guidance and the direction that was given clearly by a set of experts in the Countryside Agency at the time.

We all know of the resource restrictions that have been put on all of us over the past few years, and the implications of that, but there are functions that we feel could still be continued in providing quality assessment methods to judge landscape situations—whether they have the capacity to accommodate change or whether there is a sensitivity to valued landscape settings, or in the wider setting of landscape. All landscapes matter to somebody somewhere; it is not all about the valuable areas of national parks or the national scenic areas, as we have in Scotland, or the AONBs that you have in England and in other parts of the UK. They are very important, but it is about the much broader landscape-scale thinking that we have, which crosses all types of landscape quality settings. They were so much part of what we had at one time in the Landscape Character Network, which looked at character and distinctiveness of landscapes right across the board, no matter what the condition. It is that understanding and complete perspective that is so important for the general public, and that is where we start to connect it with the health and well-being of local communities, which is a very important area of policy in various parts of the UK.

**Baroness Whitaker:** Would you suggest any new measures to make up for the deficit in focus?

**Rebecca Hughes:** I might err on the side of the reintroduction of measures as opposed to the introduction of new ones. This whole area of guidance, which Natural England cannot produce at the moment, is very much a restriction on what can be said. The illustrative guidance is very limited; it is only in words. For the guidance that we use in landscape analysis, and in assessing capacity for accommodating change, we often use visual and illustrative techniques. They are important for those who are practising and for those considering and deciding whether changes are okay or not okay, or approvable or not approvable. Those people depend on visual materials. At the moment, I understand from colleagues who I have connections with in Natural England that it is very difficult for them to put out any guidance in that form.

**Baroness Whitaker:** I was struck this morning by more information about social mobility and how very much worse it is in rural areas. Do either of you in the Landscape Institute have anything to offer on that?

**Merrick Denton-Thompson:** Further to the point that I tried to make about local government rural-proofing services, there are some really innovative ideas. There is a very good one in west Sussex, which I am very aware of. The mobility of young people in accessing employment is very restricted by the issue of rural buses and transport. West Sussex County Council is not an authority that I have any dealings with, but it has introduced a new system whereby it will support access to mobility methods for young people.

**Baroness Whitaker:** You are talking about physical mobility.
**Merrick Denton-Thompson:** It is about accessing jobs and being able to move around the landscape and get to employment. That council has set aside an investment package, having undertaken the rural-proofing and discovering that there is a problem with restrictions on young people getting jobs because they cannot get to the work, and put a mechanism in place whereby there is subsidised travel.

**Baroness Whitaker:** So it might be a matter of sharing good practice.

**Merrick Denton-Thompson:** Exactly. Rebecca made the point that the Countryside Agency was very quick at demonstrating best practice and issuing guidance. I think that is missing now.

**The Chairman:** In answer to the question, neither of you mentioned the Commission for Rural Communities. Do you feel that that organisation fulfilled a purpose, or was it merely a statistical or analytical body that produced reports?

**Merrick Denton-Thompson:** I well remember the rural advocate, Stuart Burgess. If we can just stand back for a moment, here was a proposal to amalgamate three government agencies, but then suddenly we did not have one and we were beginning to have yet another. So it was rather half-hearted, and I do not think that the investment or penetration by the rural advocate was really effective. I do not say that that was the rural advocate’s problem; I suspect that it was due to how the commission was set up in the first place. The work was very valuable, but it was very restricted by the resources available to it.

**Q164 The Earl of Caithness:** May I turn the spotlight on to Natural England’s role as a planning consultant? Is it doing a good job on that, and is landscape taken fully into account?

**Merrick Denton-Thompson:** I have to say that landscape is not being taken adequately into account. It does not have the resources, so in a staff of 1,600 there are only four or five people with a landscaping qualification and an ability to support it. I will give you an example. We went out to our members, and we had a plethora of responses, which we can make available to the Committee. Natural England was consulted on a major development in the South Downs National Park, which is a new national park, and back came three pages on biodiversity and three lines on landscape, which basically said, “We don’t have the skills. Consult your local authority”.

That might sound like an effective bit of communication, but of course Natural England had not recognised that landscape skills have haemorrhaged out of the public sector. From our research we can see that we have lost 50% of the posts in the public sector at all levels of government, particularly in local government. As a professional institute we are trying to say that, yes, we understand that there is a balance between wealth generation and public investment, but the balance is not right at the moment. We cannot see growth back into the public sector of these skills, although perhaps what we can see is the development of the
intelligent client function within the public sector so that the policy of commissioning the private sector to deliver services is carried out from an informed position. That seemed to us to be a move towards bridging the gulf. Natural England assumed that the skills were there, but they were not. On that particular development ambition, the response on landscape was very poor indeed and I am afraid that it is pretty similar to other instances across the country.

The Earl of Caithness: Looking ahead, we are going to have a 25-year environmental plan and it seems that natural capital will play quite a significant role in it. What are your views on how to value landscape in a natural capital world?

Merrick Denton-Thompson: That is a challenging question. Let us start with the natural capital process. We fundamentally support the building of a business case for the foundations of life: clean air, clean water, restored soils, and a countryside teeming with wildlife, while ensuring that all that does not conflict with society. Indeed, it is what society would like to see in the countryside. We are still undertaking natural capital accounting separately from our budgeting. Until the Treasury audits the natural capital account and owns that audit, we will not see zero-based budgeting, although that is the extent of the change that we need to see.

In the 25-year environment plan, with respect to the Government we believe that there should be a national rural land management policy—I use my words carefully; it is not a plan but a policy—that sets out the public agenda for a multifunctional countryside. I think that society and the Government recognise the symbiotic relationship between the countryside and towns and that there is a real need for close working. The 25-year environmental plan falls out of that policy and the mechanisms for its delivery will be very different in towns than in the countryside. We have recommended to Defra how to deliver on this. Our towns really ought to see community-led initiatives: the urban village concept where a community is defined and interaction sought from it in collaboration across the private, voluntary and public sectors. In rural areas we are saying no and that the policy and the plan ought to be articulated at the landscape scale using the national character areas as the framework, either individually or a multiple of them.

Our starting point, as you will see in our evidence, is that for our national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty, under the Environment Act 1995 and the CROW Act there is a responsibility to prepare management plans for these protected landscapes. However, there is no obligation on anybody to do anything about those plans. This is a bit of dysfunctional government which we think ought to be made to work. Why not at the landscape scale—let us take the South Downs National Park as an example—have national appointees on the board along with local appointees and representation from the parishes? That is the standard model for a national park authority, which ensures that both national and local interests are represented.
If they are producing a single-articulation public agenda for the South Downs, surely it makes sense for all government investment to be made through that plan. I have to say that we think there is a need for the Environment Agency and Natural England to be more locally accountable, because the public will then understand what is being delivered by the investment. There will be more rather than less support for investment to support the farming industry in its move towards more sustainable food production. We therefore suggest that for the landscape scale—the 159 national character areas or a multiple of them—there should be a management plan. That is very scientifically effective because the character areas are defined by the science in terms of their soils, micro-climate, topography, geology and natural systems. That gives you the character; it is really the interaction between human activity and natural systems.

No value is placed on the process of assessing the national character areas; it is purely a description of place. The beauty of it—this was originally down to the Countryside Agency, because before 2000 the process had been a joint effort between English Nature and the Countryside Agency along with Scottish Natural Heritage—was that it was about saying, “Look, if we’re going to define landscapes, we ought to give them place names so that people can relate to them”. In that way you know that you live in and are a passionate supporter of the south Pennines as much as if you live in and are a passionate supporter of the New Forest. These are landscape descriptions of place, and you can get the very best out of any intervention, because these places have responded in the same way to previous interventions. A very strong business case can be developed for using the character areas and the landscape framework as the foundation for agenda-setting, accountability and delivery.

The Earl of Caithness: There is a lot to pick up on in that, but I cannot do so because of a lack of time. I have a brief question for Rebecca Hughes. Is there anything from your experience in Scotland that could be useful in England?

Rebecca Hughes: We still have a fairly healthy level of landscape expertise in Scottish Natural Heritage. I checked on the numbers just a few days ago and the team up there is still quite healthy in scale, with around a dozen people to cover the whole country. Similarly, Natural England landscape staff are restricted in what they can comment on, even with extra hands on deck. The organisation is putting out guidance. It cannot work with Natural England, but it needs to move forward on certain things, particularly in relation to coastal and offshore developments: namely, seascape situations as well as mainland ones. It works very directly with what it calls natural heritage future, which is what Merrick has been talking about in the landscape national character map. It is about a combination of biodiversity and landscape diversity in what are landscape-scale units. Everyone is working on the same agenda regarding the health of the situation and the condition of processes. Ultimately that provides biodiversity and scenic qualities while relating
them closely to rural sustainability and the future of communities in rural settings. As you can imagine, rural sustainability in the Highlands is dependent on tourism along with a very different form of agriculture from that practised in England, although there are some areas of commonality. However, the idea of rural sustainability is very much about landscape and agriculture.

Lord Cavendish of Furness: My question follows on from Lord Caithness’s question. Does the current planning system, with its emphasis on local plans and reliance on the National Planning Policy Framework, allow local authorities to conserve and enhance landscapes? Are decisions taken at the appropriate spatial scale to allow the landscape to be protected?

Merrick Denton-Thompson: We obviously had a period of transition, moving away from structure and regional spatial planning, so there is rather a large cavity between the National Planning Policy Framework and local plans and neighbourhood planning. If we are being sensitive about our land-use planning system, when you have that great cavity you lose landscape scale immediately; you are driven directly down to local plans. The Landscape Institute has been approached by local government to produce a model landscape-led local plan. That reflects our belief that it is very important that the delivery of landscape, particularly in our urban areas, is intrinsically linked with our economic performance and the health and well-being of our communities. We think it is a massive asset to society if we can deliver landscape infrastructure associated with any development, particularly housing. Our response to the housing White Paper was “homes, not houses”, which implies that these are places where children will make friends for life and where the elderly will live. We need multifunctional landscapes to deliver society’s needs.

On spatial planning, at a time when we have densification of our towns and cities, there is an issue with greenbelt, which predates the sustainable development imperative. There is a lot of misunderstanding among the public about green belt. We think that landscape infrastructure is absolutely vital in any change or review of our spatial planning strategy. At the moment, we do not think that Natural England has the resources to operate at a local scale. By having your National Planning Policy Framework up here and then immediately dropping down to hundreds of local plans, how can Natural England ever connect with that framework? It cannot.

Lord Cavendish of Furness: Can you give me an example of the cavity or shortcoming that you have in mind, without necessarily naming names? I want to link this shortcoming in the system.

Merrick Denton-Thompson: How can you plan infrastructure if you have an all-embracing national policy up here and then a local delivery at a local plan, which by its nature deals with a very small area of land? We have neither strategic planning at a county level or a regional spatial planning system. Both those have been lost with the strategic scale of planning. Consequently, planning of infrastructure is very difficult. I
personally think that even meeting the housing targets in the way we are trying to meet them is extremely difficult if you are drilling directly down without any context-setting that respects regional variations.

Q166 **Baroness Byford:** Following on from that question, you spoke earlier about the protection that the AONBs and national parks have and about the planning authorities and how that works. You have also told us this morning about the holes in other areas. I have two questions. First, do you think that local government has the capacity to look in the broader way even outside its own patch to make decisions on the broader context in which they are placed? Secondly, if there is a gap in Natural England’s ability to do what we want to achieve, as you have described, what could be put in its place or be done to rectify the gap that exists?

**Merrick Denton-Thompson:** I will answer the last question first, if you do not mind. This is where my professional institute must be much more proactive in pointing out to local government that without the necessary skills—to use a European term—you are not a competent authority in the delivery of what the public needs out of a fully functioning spatial planning system. If you do not have the skills, how can you possibly press through your regulatory and other systems the sort of standards that we as a modern society should be demanding?

**Baroness Byford:** Could one buy in those skills?

**Merrick Denton-Thompson:** I think that the model that I tried to express, which I probably have not explained very well, means that yes, you can do that. We must have a system whereby we build the intelligent client to enable local authorities to buy in, but from an informed position. We have made a proposition, with the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management; we are suggesting that we should push for a head of landscape and biodiversity as a title but not as a huge industry. It would be a single, strategic post within every local authority, who could then advise members across party of the issues and policy needs. Crucially—and this is the single most important job—it would act as the intelligent client in buying in specific ring-fenced services to meet the particular needs of that particular authority. That is a pragmatic way forward; it is about skilling the local authority to make sure that it is properly skilled, to drive policy in this area, and commission the private sector. But most of the work and investment will be done through the private sector.

**Baroness Whitaker:** Following on from what you have said, would either of you make the case for a regional tier of planning, at least for the aspects that you have been discussing, if not for the whole planning system?

**Rebecca Hughes:** I think my answer would be yes, definitely, because there is no other place for it to sit except at that middle tier level, and the direction to connect with the strategic above it and local from it is very clearly needed. We are very much missing that presence.
The Chairman: So in today’s structures is that at LEP level, now that the RDAs have gone?

Rebecca Hughes: Yes.

Merrick Denton-Thompson: I would say that it is not at LEP level, which is very confined, constrained and targeted specifically. We need a much more comprehensive, sub-national scale of delivery, whether that is at a county, strategic or at a regional level—I do not want to enter into that debate. There are signs, of course, that regions are re-emerging with collaboration, but that collaboration is at the incentive of individual authorities and, frankly, we will not get a comprehensive coverage of the country through that mechanism. But it takes some courage to restructure local government to put in a comprehensive structure for spatial planning.

Baroness Parminter: At this stage, there is a lot of agreement at a high level about the opportunities to improve the environment post-Brexit. Where do you see the policy capacity and delivery capacity to ensure that we deliver for the environment and minimise the clear threats as we leave?

Merrick Denton-Thompson: This is a massive opportunity. Putting aside the arguments for and against Brexit for a moment, we have not been in control of our own destiny when it comes to our rural landscapes. We think that this is a huge moment in time that will pass fairly quickly. Your work is incredibly important, because if we get the model right the next 200 or 300 years will be much more positive for rural areas.

The model I have painted is of a land management policy articulated at the national level and on the landscape scale along with working with the mechanisms of the farming industry. Let us go back to the South Downs as a model. In the end, the landscape is determined by farming and food production, and we must not forget that. In fact, sometimes we have to say to our ecologist friends that they should remember that the richest terrestrial habitats are actually the products of farming. The question is how we connect and make that efficient. We feel that there is a need for clarity in the public agenda. I am afraid that the legislative framework is littered with initiatives for giving local government new responsibilities under the various annual local government Acts. Not many people in the LGA can say exactly what the statutory obligations of local government are on the handling of interventions in the farming industry. Clarity for the farming industry is very important, as is certainty. We would say that if there is a 25-year plan, with respect to Ministers we ought to have a commitment from the Government to 25 years of investment of around £3.5 billion so that we have certainty, because that is very important. We absolutely support the concept of public investment for public goods.

However, at the top of the pile should be sustainably produced food as a public good. That is quite a challenge. A huge amount is being done by the farming industry, but frankly not enough. We think that we can get the agenda right by building a business case around the natural capital of
clean air, which is not just an urban issue. It is very much a serious rural issue too when we consider nitrous oxide being released from nitrates. The case is there for clean water; I am thinking in particular of phosphates and nitrates. There is a case for restored soils. We have put out the strapline, "Let the legacy of Brexit see the restoration of UK soils". We have not paid enough attention to this issue and we have not helped the farming industry through our interventions.

Our suggested model would provide clarity in the public agenda and a contractual relationship with the farming industry for the delivery of that phalanx of public goods, accepting that sustainable food production is a public good. I have to accept that the CLA does not agree and nor do the conservation organisations, so we stand a little alone on this particular point. However, we will stick with it. We believe that secure and sustainably produced food requires public investment. You cannot treat farming like any other business. Given what it delivers for society, it is too important. So we have listed in our evidence what the public goods are and that there should be a contractual relationship. We think that there should be certainty. I hinted earlier that the way we have administered public investment is very dysfunctional. It is all about the problems of disallowance and the fact that we might not get our investment back from Europe. That has driven our administration, which is profoundly dysfunctional. We ought to be building a collaborative relationship and sharing some of the responsibilities. Part of our model is therefore a new position, perhaps building on the field staff of Natural England, where responsibility for the delivery of public goods is shared with the farming industry so that a collaborative relationship is developed.

When I reviewed rural services and the rural pathfinder, the point made by representatives of the farming industry was that the farm gate opens and different people from the public sector come through it, all of them with different agendas. That is not very effective communication. We ought to have a one-to-one relationship with the farming industry. I hope that that has answered your question properly.

Baroness Parminter: It is an answer. Thank you.

Q167 The Chairman: The last question is the $64,000 one. If you have a single recommendation that you would like us to make, what would it be? You are allowed one answer each.

Rebecca Hughes: My key ask would be to find a means to reinstate the function of providing local authorities with strategic guidance from Natural England. The opportunity to provide a toolkit ought to be established. We know that the issues of staffing and resources are not going to go away, so a key way of working around them is by providing guidance and direction on landscape matters. That applies at all scales from the valued landscapes of national parks and AONBs to the ordinary landscapes of the areas where people live. It is about providing guidance as a result of landscape character assessment of development types and...
how landscape capacity can be identified. In that way we will not lose our landscape resources.

**Merrick Denton-Thompson:** I would really love the Committee to recognise the importance of landscape. It has not been well served, although through no single action, so it would be good to see landscape recognised in legislation and regulation without it being heavy-handed. There is a lack of presence on the one thing that bonds all these agendas together in a way that the public can really respond to. Their local landscapes are precious to them, but we do not recognise that in legislation.

**The Chairman:** Thank you both very much. We are extremely grateful to you.