Rural England CIC – written evidence (NER0006)

1. Rural England CIC is pleased to have the opportunity to submit evidence to this House of Lords Select Committee inquiry. Our submission focuses on the first three questions posed by the call for evidence, which are those under the heading, rural advocacy and the Commission for Rural Communities.

2. Rural England is a Community Interest Company. Its aim is to inform and engender better policy making by undertaking independent research, supporting information exchange and building networks among those concerned with the well-being of rural communities. It was established because of a perceived gap which has opened up in rural research and evidence, which it hoped to try and partially address, whilst recognising this was highly dependent upon available resources.

3. Rural England CIC has a Stakeholders Group, which informs its work programme and priorities. This Group includes some former Commissioners of the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), including Lord Cameron of Dillington. It also includes representatives from a wide range of rural interest groups, such as the National Farmers Union, Country Land & Business Association, Rural Services Network, Action with Communities in Rural England, National Association of Local Councils, National Trust, Council for the Protection of Rural England, Plunkett Foundation, Women in Rural Enterprise, National Association of Women’s Institutes and Age UK. Some of these organisations may respond to the call for evidence and this submission does not pretend to speak for any of them. Rather, this submission has been written by the Directors of Rural England CIC.

Q1 Since the closure of the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), and subsequent winding up of the Defra Rural Communities Policy Unit, how – if at all - are the CRC’s original functions of advocate, adviser and watchdog being fulfilled?

4. Adviser: this former CRC role is in large part about the use of rural evidence. As noted above, Rural England CIC is concerned that the rural evidence base has deteriorated and narrowed. The CRC had a significant research and statistical output. We acknowledge that Defra produced a Statistical Digest of Rural England report, which it updates on a fairly regular basis. However, Defra does not appear to undertake or commission other rural affairs research i.e. about social and economic issues affecting rural communities and rural economies. Added to which, rural university departments have reduced their output on rural affairs topics and focussed their effort on environmental and land management research, because that is where there is still funding available. There are two particular issues we would highlight.
5. First, there are some specific gaps in the evidence base. One example is a lack of information about the use and uptake of online services by rural communities. This seems surprising given the rapid growth of online shopping, online banking and online booking, plus the scope this has for reducing rural communities’ need to access service outlets in person. Another example is that there are now fewer statistics about rural people’s access to services. The Department for Transport accessibility statistics cover only eight service types. The broader dataset, produced by the CRC, were discontinued after 2010.

6. Second, more fundamentally, there is a real dearth of exploratory research, which seeks to understand the rural implications of social and economic trends or the rural implications of public policy developments. Whilst statistics, such as the Statistical Digest of Rural England, are certainly valuable, it is equally important to get behind those statistics and to explore why trends come about, how they play out in local areas for rural residents and businesses, whether policy responses are having the desired effects in rural areas and what good rural practice is being developed.

7. We understand from oral evidence given to your Select Committee by Defra officials that the department now largely looks to external organisations, like the Research Councils, to commission rural projects and, to that end, has produced some rural policy questions it would like to see researched. We would welcome sight of that list and would be pleased to hear of any rural research that is happening as a result of engagement with bodies such as Research Councils.

8. The Select Committee may wish to know that the main evidence-based outputs from Rural England CIC, to-date, has been:
- The State of Rural Services 2016 report, reporting trends across nine service areas;
- A rural residents’ survey, which will lead to the establishment of a Rural Panel; and
- Research on vulnerability as it affects older people living in rural areas.

The organisation is also undertaking a project on domiciliary care in rural areas and commissioned research on the digital potential of businesses in rural areas. Results from completed projects are all in the public domain and we would be pleased to say a bit more about our ingoing work if that was helpful for the Select Committee.

9. **Watchdog:** this former CRC role was in large part about the application of rural proofing. We recognise that the Rural Team within Defra produces rural roofing guidance (recently updated) and that it engages with other departments to input rural thinking to their policy making. We also understand the Defra Rural Team has run some rural proofing workshops for other departments.
10. This activity is welcome, though the practice of rural proofing and, in some respects, the approach to rural proofing continues to be problematic. We expand on this in our answer to question two. It may be that some rural proofing functions work well when carried out within Whitehall, for example because Defra has easier access to or more of an inside track to civil servants in other departments. Equally, some functions may work better from an independent position outside Whitehall, such as the monitoring of rural proofing, not least on those occasions where rural proofing raises fundamental questions about a policy direction.

11. Advocate: this former CRC role was largely the function of its Chairman, who was the Government’s Rural Advocate. Advocacy falls outside the remit of Rural England CIC, which seeks to inform the policy debate with sound and independent evidence, but which does not engage in campaigning or lobbying activity. We will, therefore, leave it to other organisations to pass comment.

Q2 Are sufficient measures being taken to ensure that policies are rural proofed at national and local levels? Who is taking the lead on policy for rural areas and who should be taking the lead on such matters?

12. It would seem fair to conclude that the extent of rural proofing and its impact on policy making remains a concern for many rural stakeholder organisations. A number of points can be made:

a. Extent of rural proofing: the independent review, which was led by Lord Cameron of Dillington on behalf of Defra, found that rural proofing by other Whitehall departments was very patchy. This disappointing conclusion was similar to the earlier assessments made by the CRC in its annual rural proofing reports.

b. Capacity within Defra: inevitably, the Rural Team within Defra can only engage with other Whitehall policy making teams to the extent it has the staff resources to do so. The hope has always been that other departments would - if given workshops, guidance and other resources – undertake rural proofing of their own accord and without the need for Defra input. However, the evidence indicates that some (ongoing) prompt, if not some assistance, is typically required. Rural interest organisations may sometimes feel that they are plugging gaps e.g. on the Community Rights agenda and with the BIG Lottery Fund.

c. External assessment: there is no longer any regular, external monitoring of rural proofing by Whitehall. The annual reports produced by the CRC, despite their limitations, gave a snapshot of progress and provided an external perspective. It
should be possible to produce a fairly meaningful independent assessment, largely based upon monitoring departmental Annual Reports and policy Impact Statements.

d. Buy-in to rural proofing: the independent rural proofing review recognised that it is more likely to be taken seriously in departments where there is buy-in to the process at senior levels, including at Ministerial level. In short, when it is known that rural proofing is an expectation, it is likely to happen.

e. Timeliness of rural proofing: too often any rural proofing would appear to take place late in the policy making process, once most of the parameters have been decided. Whilst that is certainly better than nothing, rural proofing will have greater impact if it is embedded in policy making processes and considered early on. This requires higher awareness of rural issues and rural proofing.

f. Engagement with rural stakeholders: there does not appear to be much engagement with rural stakeholder organisations during the policy making process. Often rural concerns arise at the point when a policy proposal is formally consulted upon and those concerns might have been averted had there been earlier engagement with relevant representative organisations. This could also help to ground rural proofing in the experience of policy and project delivery at the local level. The CRC often used its networks with practitioner organisations to inform its rural proofing advice, alongside using its research and statistical evidence.

13. Rural proofing can be just as relevant at the local level. Whilst some local administrative areas are essentially rural, making it hard for them not to ‘think rural’, there may still be challenges in reaching the most isolated communities. Moreover, there are other administrative areas which are mainly urban, but which have rural parts, where the need for rural proofing may be more obvious. What is clear is that any rural proofing resource needs adapting to make it relevant to local policy making processes and service delivery issues. Whitehall resources will not be suited.

14. A set of local rural proofing resources were developed in 2012 using Defra funding. This set out eighteen ‘underlying principles’. These were facets of local policy making and delivery that were frequently and repeatedly found in rural good practice, and which could therefore usefully be considered when designing local policies, strategies and service plans. The resources are still available on the previous (archived) Defra website and can be found on the Rural Services Network website – see this link: http://www.rsnonline.org.uk/best-practice/local-level-rural-proofing Whilst there may be other effective ways of approaching local level rural proofing, these resources still appear very relevant.
Q3 What role should Defra – or other Government departments – play in co-ordinating policy for rural areas? How effectively are the interests – including social and economic interests – of rural communities being represented within the current structures of Government, and how could representation and co-ordination be improved?

15. We will make just one practical comment on the representation of rural communities, since that topic strays into advocacy. Rural England CIC, working with the University of Gloucestershire, has recently run a substantial survey of rural residents (over 2,600 responses). We plan to create a Rural Panel from a sub-set of representative respondents, spread across the country, who have said they are willing to join it. This will give us scope to test the views of rural people on a fairly regular basis.

16. Building upon our comments about the rural adviser and watchdog roles from the NERC Act, we consider that the Defra co-ordination role could usefully include:
   a. Developing the evidence base, both by creating a rural cut on the data sets of Whitehall departments and by commissioning rural research in order to understand emerging policy issues. Where possible, rural data sets should also be capable of disaggregation to local levels, so they can inform local rural proofing;
   b. Identifying the economic, social and environmental priorities for rural communities and businesses that most need attention across Whitehall i.e. rural strategy;
   c. Raising awareness of rural issues and needs across Whitehall departments, both at political and policy team (civil servant) levels;
   d. Ensuring policy teams in Whitehall departments understand rural proofing, recognise the commitment to it and have access to appropriate guidance so they can apply it;
   e. Liaising with rural stakeholder (or interest) groups and helping ensure that their policy evidence and experience feeds in to Whitehall policy making processes;
   f. Engaging, more intensively, with Whitehall departments on the policy development topics, where there is likely to be a strong rural dimension or interest.

17. The Directors of Rural England CIC hope that this submission is of interest to the House of Lords inquiry. It reflects our experience of work with the former CRC and with Defra. Although Rural England CIC is a relatively new venture and one with a modest budget, it seeks to contribute evidence itself to the policy debate and thus to (what in NERC terminology is) the adviser role. By way of illustration, this link is to our webpage on the State of Rural Services 2016 report: [https://ruralengland.org/the-state-of-rural-services-2016-report/](https://ruralengland.org/the-state-of-rural-services-2016-report/)

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