Rural Coalition – written evidence (NER0037)

Introduction

1. The Rural Coalition is a group of 12 national organisations who share a vision for a living and working countryside. Each member organisation has its own independent perspective and constituency, but, given many shared values, we seek to be more influential by joining in common cause.

2. The Coalition first began in September 2008, when 6 leading national bodies concerned about the future of rural communities in England came together with the support of the Commission for Rural Communities. The CRC provided support and technical expertise to the Coalition.

3. In July 2017, the Coalition published a statement, setting out four policy principles, which it believes should underpin policy making:
   - Brexit discussions must recognise ‘rural’ is more than agriculture and the natural environment
   - All Brexit negotiations and post-Brexit policies must be rural proofed
   - Policies and funding must deliver a fair deal for rural communities
   - Decision-making, funding and delivery must be devolved and involve rural communities

4. Given the Coalition’s focus and background, our evidence to the Select Committee concentrates on the issues relating to the first section on Rural Advocacy and the Commission for Rural Communities

Demise of the CRC

5. In our view, the closure of the CRC has led to a vacuum in the commissioning and provision of independent research, policy advice and analysis of good practice in rural issues. Several organisations and groupings, including the Coalition itself, have attempted to fill the gap, but they do not have the same purpose, funding or status of the CRC. As a result, the rural voice has become fragmented and is in danger of being undervalued and overlooked. The role of Rural Advocate has been wound up (although the Rural Affairs Minister in Defra has the responsibility to act as rural ambassador) and there is no one body able to act as a focus for rural advocacy. The role of watchdog has virtually disappeared.

6. One of the major impacts of the demise of the CRC has been the loss of rural research and data analysis, such as the work previously carried out on rural services, the wider rural economy and rural disadvantage. Although its remit was subject to Ministerial agreement, the CRC was also able to take a longer-term view and look at future issues, not necessarily driven by immediate political priorities.

Role of Defra

7. Whilst Defra has made some attempt to undertake the CRC’s work, it has suffered from turnover in personnel and shifts in priorities. Initially, there were some positive
developments, such as the production of the rural productivity plan, but these have lapsed, as staff with rural expertise (in particular, those transferred from the CRC) have moved on and other changes have meant that from time to time there has been a vacuum within Defra itself. In addition, the very nature of its position as a mainstream Government Department, whilst, on the one hand, potentially giving it more political clout across Whitehall, means that Defra cannot be independent and must be subject to Government and Ministerial priorities. This has been highlighted by Brexit, where the focus within Government and Defra has been primarily on agriculture and the natural environment. Although the current Minister for Rural Affairs is strongly committed to the rural agenda, it is not clear that the wider rural voice is being heard across Whitehall.

8. The problems are compounded by the changes in the way that research is now commissioned generally which means that it is more difficult for Defra to fund research and analysis, although we understand it is currently seeking to improve rural data collection and analysis.

Rural proofing

9. Focussing the role of rural advocacy within Defra, rather than a separate agency sitting alongside government or even a regulatory body, carries the risk that other Government Departments see ‘rural’ as primarily Defra’s role and not theirs. Defra does take the lead across Whitehall and has secured some successes, but the process is not transparent and it is not always clear how the priorities are set. To work effectively, rural proofing needs to happen at the start of the policy process, as policies and programmes are being formulated, and not as an add-on.

10. The Coalition made clear in its recent statement that rural proofing across Government was a key priority. This is particularly relevant in the context of the current negotiations for the UK to leave the EU. Brexit – and post Brexit policies – must work for rural communities as well as more generally. This means that all Whitehall departments must test policy proposals and future funding programmes to ensure they are designed to suit rural circumstances.

11. Our experience is that currently rural proofing is piecemeal and that key policies do not take sufficient account of the particular needs and challenges in rural areas. For example, there is a severe and growing shortage of affordable housing in rural areas, which is not being properly addressed; funding formulae do not recognise the challenges and additional costs of rural service delivery (adult social care and bus services have been particularly hard hit by public sector austerity and private sector cost-cutting and efficiency savings); and business support, including mobile and broadband connectivity, are patchy. The last Government’s industrial strategy green paper said little about the rural dimension.

12. There needs to be more positive action to encourage rural proofing at national and local levels, including among agencies, such as Local Enterprise Partnerships. In order to ensure this happens, there should be a requirement to report annually on rural proofing activity by government departments, agencies and those receiving government funds or carrying out functions on behalf of government. Defra, or an independent body, should have the role of producing an overview annually reporting on rural proofing activity.
Rural policy co-ordination

13. Clearly, within government, Defra has the lead role to play in co-ordinating rural policy, but it needs more teeth and to be more transparent. There needs to be a better flow of information and a proper dialogue between Defra, OGDs and rural interests. The Coalition has a good working relationship with Defra and is pleased to meet its officials and the Minister regularly. But it could do more to assist the process of formulating and monitoring policies affecting rural areas. It could:
   • help to identify solutions to rural policy and delivery challenges
   • act as a sounding board, with rural proofing advice when developing policies and programmes
   • use its networks to find examples of good rural practice and innovation

The changing context

14. Membership of the European Union has had an impact on rural communities and businesses through trade, regulations, funding programmes and migrant labour. Many rural businesses and projects have benefited from funding from the LEADER and EAFRD programmes, in particular, which will cease after the exit from the EU. It is essential that the structures and funding which are put in their place take full account of the needs of rural businesses and communities and ensure their future sustainability.

Members of the Rural Coalition:

*Action with Communities in Rural England, Campaign to Protect Rural England, Country Land and Business Association, Germinate: The Arthur Rank Centre, National Association of Local Councils, National Farmers Union, National Housing Federation, Plunkett Foundation, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, Royal Town Planning Institute, Rural Services Network, Town and Country Planning Association*

**President:** Rt Revd Dr Alan Smith, Bishop of St Albans

**Chair:** Margaret Clark CBE

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