Bishop of St Albans and Bishop of Hereford- written evidence (NER0043)

Response by The Rt Revd Dr Alan Smith, Lord Bishop of St Albans and The Rt Revd Richard Frith, Bishop of Hereford

Introduction:

The Bishop of St Albans responds as the lead Bishop on rural affairs in the House of Lords and on behalf of the Lords Spiritual. He also serves as the President of the Rural Coalition. The Bishop of Hereford responds as Chair of the Rural Affairs Group of the Church of England’s General Synod.

1. This is a timely opportunity to examine the effectiveness of this legislation, given the importance of the provisions of this act in light of current Brexit negotiations. Comments are offered for the first three consultation questions.

2. The Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) had an important role primarily as adviser across government departments and related bodies. The advisory role was well expressed in the quality of the research, particularly that which explored the realities for rural residents. This qualitative research which often included the impact of policy on rural communities and people was extremely valuable. Despite the high quality of the research, it is clear that it was not always taken into consideration as seriously as needed by other government departments. This qualitative research base is missing from Defra’s current research programme and although quarterly updating of quantitative statistics is useful for many, it does not go beyond a limited range of measures. Policy makers are missing out on grassroots experience and understanding which is having a detrimental impact on the quality and applicability of legislation (illustrated by repeated negative policy changes in affordable housing in rural areas).

3. There are many excellent university based research departments that could provide this qualitative evidence for Defra and other departments. We urge consideration to be given to Government finding appropriate ways of commissioning this sort of external and therefore independent research to support relevant rural policy making.

4. In terms of its advocacy and watchdog roles, CRC, like Defra subsequently, seemed not to be as effective as was and still is needed. The advocacy role relied too much on the skills, personality and working relationships of one individual. As such the role of Rural Advocate was not always listened to, and this had a similar impact on the watchdog role. CRC and the RCPU did not always seem to be informed of policy announcements in advance and were often trying to rural proof after the policy had been announced, something that continues to be the case. For example it is obvious from the Department for Education revision to the schools funding formula that rural proofing had either not taken place or had not been applied effectively.
5. Organisations such as the Rural Coalition have sought to work with Defra and other Government departments to offer advice, relevant grassroots experience and related input. However, as they rightly operate independently of Government, they find it hard to make a difference early enough in the policy making process for the needs of rural communities and their residents to be adequately taken into consideration. Rural proofing must take place earlier in the policy cycle and we recommend that mandatory annual reporting is applied to all Government departments and bodies.

6. The watchdog role is missing currently as by definition it is difficult to have an independent watchdog across Government if Defra is trying to take on the function. Lord Cameron’s 2015 report Independent Rural Proofing: Implementation Review made some critical recommendations for high level engagement by ministers and officials and to which Defra responded, with a promise to mainstreaming of the approach to the impact of policy on rural areas. We urge Defra to work with other Government departments to ensure that key staff have the seniority and experience to apply the relevant rural proofing guidance effectively.

7. To this end we would recommend that Defra make more use of recognised rural experts and academics to advise on the potential impact of proposed policies much earlier in the process, supply relevant examples of related good practice and challenge inaccuracies or assumptions. Bodies such as the Rural Coalition could carry out this role.

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