Norfolk Rural Strategy Steering Group – written evidence (NER0065)

Response from Clarke Willis, MBE, Chair of the Norfolk Rural Development Strategy Steering Group, also incorporating comments on behalf of Norfolk Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG)

Questions 1-3 in relation to rural advocacy, its importance and the effectiveness of its current delivery in Government.

I am responding to the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act consultation on behalf of the Norfolk Rural Development Strategy Steering Group, a public/private sector partnership which came together in 2013 to develop and deliver a strategy to address rural issues and enable rural business growth in Norfolk. This response highlights the role our group has in delivering for rural areas in Norfolk to inform your discussion about the role and significance of rural advocacy at national level.

Since 2013, we have delivered –

- Over £10m EU funding into rural business growth and skills investment
- A highly successful Digital Divide group which worked with Ministers and technology providers to enable a highly effective broadband and mobile coverage initiative in rural Norfolk which has had a significant positive impact on businesses and rural residents.
- Delivered a major conference on the economic opportunities presented by the spending power of our older population – the ‘silver pound’. George Freeman MP addressed the conference, which showcased a number of inspiring businesses and projects.
- Brought together landowners, Councils and specialist advisers to consider the potential for Community Land Trusts to enable affordable housing in rural areas, an event which has generated a number of potential new projects.

We are about to launch Strong Roots – New Growth, a Norfolk Rural Strategy for 2017-2020 with a new set of target actions to support a thriving rural economy in the context of significant economic and political change. Our consultation for the new strategy has emphasised that in every area of major policy, public investment or private sector enterprise, there are specific rural issues or opportunities which can be overlooked without high level rural advocates making the case. Examples include –

- The need to bring agencies and businesses together to develop environmental and tourism policy for our County which helps us to ensure a world class environment for work and play
- Specifically rural challenges around water management, and energy resources which without high level planning and advocacy can hamper rural business growth.
- The need to innovate and re-focus businesses in farming and agri-food to improve resilience and competitiveness.
- The need to move on from broadband delivery to imaginative use of technology in rural areas to grow high value businesses and to support the delivery of public services like social care which are especially high cost in rural areas.
Advocacy in support of skills provision which fully enables those living in rural areas, with limited access to transport, childcare and other resources, to engage in the workforce.

In all of these areas we are proposing to deliver significant public/private/voluntary sector partnership groups to drive improvements and change. We believe this is vital and unique work, which should be reflected in central government with a voice for rural issues at the highest level in Government. It might be helpful to consider whether Defra, with an inevitable focus on the environment and agriculture, is able to fulfil this advocacy role across the full breadth of rural affairs, or whether a grouping of ministers from a variety of departments might be charged collectively with advocacy in the rural agenda.

4. How well has Natural England fulfilled the mandate that it currently has? How well do its wide-ranging functions fit together, and does it have the appropriate powers and resources to perform these functions?

Natural England (NE) has fulfilled the mandate that it currently has reasonably well given the budget constraints and staff challenges of recent years. The core functions of SSSI/protected site management and agri-environment provision work extremely well together. What is less successful is the regulatory function being in a separate department at the Rural Payments Agency. This leaves no scope for flexibility and "intelligent" inspections, where farmers are judged on outcomes. It is the RPA that requires significant overhaul, rather than NE.

NE has not invested in its staff with many staff on short-term contracts and a high turnover. This is disliked by farmers and landowners who have no opportunity to build up a relationship with a single person which is necessary to deliver a successful agri-environment scheme over five or 10 years.

5. Are any changes to the remit and responsibilities of Natural England required, either as a result of Brexit or of other significant developments in the period since 2006?

We believe Natural England’s remit should be expanded to include regulatory function – see remarks under question 4 above. Their remit should also be expanded to include access to the countryside as part of a revived agri-environment scheme – see point below. We also suggest their remit should be expanded to include a public health function to reduce obesity, drive forward proper green infrastructure provision as part of planning, and reconnect the public with farming and food production. Their remit should also be expanded to work outside protected sites to properly implement the Lawton Report – Making Space for Nature.

6. Do the arrangements and provisions for enabling and managing access to the countryside remain appropriate? How effective have Natural England – and other partners – been in promoting better access?

Access to the countryside has gone backwards in the past three years following the cessation of payments for permissive access in agri-environment. For example in Norfolk...
between 2016 and 2017, we will lose 157 miles of permissive access as HLS agreements come to an end. Significant cuts to local authority environment departments have also contributed to a cessation of most projects outside statutory rights of way.

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