Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council – written evidence (NER0072)

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Rural Advocacy and the Commission for Rural Communities

1. 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?

2. 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?

3. 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?

I personally have no experience of the Commission for Rural Communities and consequently cannot reply here. The social and economic interests of rural parts of the Borough will be dealt with by other sections of the Council.

Natural England

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?

I have been unable to find what Natural England’s current mandate is. Internet searches of websites such as www.gov.uk drew a blank. However, according to the latter, Natural England does have a range of current Responsibilities and Priorities and these have been copied below.

Responsibilities

Within England, we’re responsible for:

- promoting nature conservation and protecting biodiversity
- conserving and enhancing the landscape
- securing the provision and improvement of facilities for the study, understanding and enjoyment of the natural environment
promoting access to the countryside and open spaces and encouraging open-air recreation
contributing in other ways to social and economic well-being through management of the natural environment, eg changes to wildlife licensing to improve flexibility for developers

Priorities

From 2014 to 2019, our priorities are:

- terrestrial biodiversity
- marine biodiversity
- landscape and geodiversity
- access and engagement
- environmental land management
- National Nature Reserves
- support to the planning system
- wildlife management
- evidence
- corporate services

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council supports Natural England in all its responsibilities and priorities. Like other government departments, Natural England has seen a reduction in funding in recent years and a concomitant reduction in what it is able to do. Ideally, we would like to see a strong and vibrant Natural England, fully funded and resourced (as we would other government departments). Protection of the natural environment is vital for our planet and species and it is up to us to show good stewardship for future generations. This works on a regional and local level as well as a national and global one. The natural environment has benefits for human health (physical and mental), creates an attractive environment in which to live and work, can be a major contributor to tourism, etc. It is often the case that the most attractive places to live and work are often the greenest and this is reflected in land and property values and in the economic wealth of these areas. Towns and cities that have incorporated green issues are amongst the most attractive (and expensive) to live whilst those purely focused on economic need (such as the former steel and coal mining areas of northern England and Wales during the last two centuries) have suffered but have improved as we have appreciated the importance of clean air, access to public open spaces, the importance of tackling pollution in rivers, better hygiene, etc. Natural England is a major force for good and an important driver in protecting and improving our
natural environment and should receive our full support, whether that is from a local, national or international level.

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?

Natural England should take over the environmental regulations and safeguarding currently undertaken by the EU. There should be no loss in terms of environmental regulations including the protection and management of species, sites and habitats. There should be a renewed commitment of research and monitoring.

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 is an important aim of Natural England but perhaps a subsidiary one. Many sites, species and habitats are sensitive and so public access may need to be restricted or reduced and this should be recognised. There are plenty of sites that can sustain higher visitor pressure but these are typically less sensitive sites such public parks and country parks. Organisations such as local and county councils along with the Environment Agency and Forest Enterprise are perhaps equally as important at promoting access to the countryside and the sites they own or manage.

**Sustainability and biodiversity**

7. Is the duty to ‘have regard’ to biodiversity, which is contained within the Act, well understood by those bodies to whom it applies? Is any further work required to raise awareness of the duty?

It probably isn’t clear what ‘biodiversity duty’ is or what councils need to do in order to have regard for biodiversity. The guidance is somewhat vague and fragmentary and it is left up planning departments to interpret this as it sees fit.

Further work at raising the profile of biodiversity duty would be useful.

8. What has been the practical impact of the 2006 duty? Is any modification to the duty required as a result of developments in our understanding of the value of ecosystems and biodiversity since 2006?

The increasing lack of funds for local government means that it is increasingly difficult to have regard to biodiversity. It would be helpful if Defra could encourage local authorities to embrace biodiversity within economic development policy, as otherwise there is the potential for the two priorities to be in conflict with each other. At the moment, biodiversity duty appears to be optional so a tightening of the legislation and increased funding is necessary to secure benefits for wildlife.
9. How does the English duty to ‘have regard’ to biodiversity compare to the Scottish duty to ‘further’ biodiversity and the enhanced biodiversity duty introduced in Wales in 2016?

I can’t answer this question.

The changing context since 2006

10. Will the structures established by the Act be sufficient to ensure appropriate protection for nature and environmental standards following Brexit? Are any modifications or changes to the structures established by the Act required to address the implications of Brexit?

The Act should be strengthened because sites, habitats and species are being lost nationally. The need to protect and manage for biodiversity needs to be increased through stricter legislation ensuring that polluters pay, that designated sites such as SSSIs are seen as sacrosanct from development, that developers are forced to consider biodiversity in planning applications and build in adequate buffers, provide monies for impacts on adjacent wildlife sites, provide adequate mitigation, etc.

11. Are there any further parts of the Act which are currently in force that need to be re-considered as a result of developments since 2006?

Some of the Species of Principal Importance need revising. Species that are on the list are often cuddly or charismatic species or species supported by strong lobby groups or with high interest amongst naturalists. Many less obvious taxonomic groups such as mosses, lichens, fungi and invertebrates include many rare species and these do not have Principal Species status. Protection of these relies on their habitats or protected species which share their habitat being protected.

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