Defined rural areas make up around 80% of Staffordshire’s land area, whilst around a quarter of our population live within rural areas with many more residing in our market towns. Policies that affect rural areas therefore have a significant effect on our county, and we therefore very much welcome this inquiry and the opportunity to comment.

Whilst the role of the Select Committee is to consider the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, the questions set out within the call for evidence clearly show an interest to consider wider Government policy. In this regard the inquiry is very well timed given the recent County Councils Network (CCN) publication, ‘A New Deal For Counties’, which sets out the priorities for county areas over the next few years and is something we wholeheartedly support.

In many ways the recent work of the CCN is a response to recent Government policies which have been largely aligned to large cities and metropolitan areas, such as City Deals and Devolution Deals, whilst advocating greater recognition of the vital role of counties in providing jobs, homes and places to visit. There has to be particular concern that counties, and therefore rural areas, have for too long experienced funding inequalities when compared with our urban counterparts, including for social care, public health, our local schools, transport and infrastructure.

However, it does now seem that there is beginning to be greater recognition of the importance of counties, such as within the emerging national Industrial Strategy and the priority to drive growth across the whole country. We need to build on our existing economic strengths whilst tackling the challenges that stifle growth, so that the economic potential of our rural areas can be realised. In doing so, it will be important to harness local knowledge and expertise from within the counties; empowering, strengthening and representing our communities in the process. As the Industrial Strategy becomes a white paper, it will be vital to ensure that this ambition is not lost.

Whilst it may have seemed sensible to have specific parts of Whitehall considering rural policy and ensuring that wider policies and programmes are ‘rural-proofed’, in practice it is debatable as to how effective this has been. Often it has seemed that rural policies and programmes have been reactive to policies from other Whitehall departments – add-ons have been created, or existing Government initiatives have been rebadged as rural without any real additionality. As an organisation external to Whitehall, we feel it is not clear what function Defra’s Rural Policy team now provides; however Defra should be actively engaged in collaborating with other Whitehall departments on policy development from the outset. Defra should have an overview of wider policy implications upon rural areas, but with ‘rural’ policy frequently being mainstreamed across government, without the need for it necessarily being lead from within Defra itself.
It is our belief that organisations and partnerships such as CCN and The Rural Coalition are well-placed to offer the functions of advocate, adviser and watchdog in the future and therefore the closure of the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), and subsequent winding up of the Defra Rural Communities Policy Unit, need not have any significant impact on Government’s policy for rural areas. We believe that a far bigger issue is the need for counties and rural areas to be considered to a much greater extent by all Whitehall departments. This will be vital to driving growth and community sustainability across the country in the coming years and particularly in light of Brexit and the significant sums of money that are currently distributed to rural areas through the EU. This is clearly no easy task but we believe that this will require strong leadership from all politicians and within all Whitehall departments to ensure that our counties and rural areas can maximise their economic potential and provide the highest-standards of living for all of our residents.

More specifically Natural England, like all public bodies, faces reduced resources and this gives rise to inevitable pressures. There has been a decreased input to land use planning with growing dependence on standing advice. This can have knock on impacts on local planning authorities and on securing socio-economic development.

Agri-environment schemes (e.g. Countryside Stewardship) are key to delivering many environmental outcomes particularly in relation to management of Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Natura 2000 sites. Following Brexit it will be important that resources are still available to deliver environmental management for these priority areas. Many of these are managed by local authorities, NGOs etc. (i.e. not farming businesses) and it will be important to secure the future of these sites and ensure that resources are still available by a similar mechanism.

In relation to the Biodiversity Duty, this has had a beneficial impact in relation to wider biodiversity (i.e. non-designated). However it is not particularly well understood and the mechanisms to determine whether it is being delivered are unclear. The equivalent duties in Scotland and Wales seem more effective in requiring enhancement which is more in line with the requirements of the NPPF, and also requiring some reporting on activity to meet the duty. With local authorities facing huge pressures on resources careful consideration is required to develop a more meaningful duty with greater clarity and a simple mechanism for assessment.

To conclude, whatever institutions are charged with this responsibility in the future, either a reinvigorated post-Brexit role for Defra, a clearly defined regional remit via Midlands Engine, or Royal Commission, they will need underpinning with stronger representation from regional CLA, NFU, AHBD and Local Government / Local Enterprise Partnership stakeholders.

Mark Parkinson, Economic Development & Planning Policy Manager
cc
Cllr Philip Atkins, Leader, Staffordshire County Council
Cllr Mark Winnington, Cabinet Member for Economic Growth, Staffordshire County Council

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