

The potential of England's rural economy

Commentary to the Government response to the EFRA Committee Report

The Chairs of seven of the eight Regional Rural Affairs Fora submitted evidence to the EFRA Select Committee inquiry into 'The potential of England's rural economy'. They are pleased to offer the Committee a brief commentary to the Department's response to the Committee Report.

The commentary does not seek to comment 'blow by blow' on the Department's response. It is DEFRA's overall strategy and approach to achieving strong rural communities that is at issue and this commentary restricts itself to five specific points in this regard.

1. DEFRA have reiterated their case for monitoring the DSO by means of both existing and new data sets focused on a relatively narrow set of indicators. These indicators present an unrealistically rosy picture of rural areas. We have heard too often locally that, because urban areas give a greater return on investment, overall numerical targets can be met without doing anything to address needs in rural areas. The approach DEFRA is taking, therefore, is weak, high risk for rural communities and disconnected from how priorities are informed at a local or regional level. DEFRA does not seem to have recognised that its ability to influence emerging decision making structures at regional and local level is very limited when it comes to community and economic objectives. It does not seem to understand the fundamental change that is needed if it is to ensure that rural areas are properly served by mainstream services at these levels.

DEFRA should take a lead within Government to revisit the definition of National Indicators that are being used to set many public sector priorities at local level and include within them a means by which delivery in rural areas will be monitored. DEFRA will then have to ensure that delivery of Local Area Agreements is monitored both in concentrated and dispersed areas of need, and this will have to form part of any assessment of their success.

2. DEFRA's response has not looked in detail at the way in which the Index of Multiple Deprivation distorts any assessment of community need solely towards areas where it is most concentrated. DEFRA should have as a central objective leavening the way in which the IMD is used within Government. They should aim for the IMD not to be used on its own but in tandem with information about actual numbers of people and families who are disadvantaged, especially across large dispersed areas of population. This will put a more correct emphasis on numbers of disadvantaged people rather than ranking of locations where they are concentrated. This is especially important when the

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index is used to making decisions on allocation of resources. As the recession bites people from all communities will be affected and this will become ever more essential.

DEFRA and the CRC's role should then be to monitor the effectiveness of this approach and influence government departments accordingly. Defra would do well to coordinate this activity through Regional Observatories and link it directly with the emerging evidence base for the Integrated Regional Strategies.

3. DEFRA have not responded in detail over the mechanisms by which local decisions and local services are delivered and we suspect that this is because they do not have the capacity to engage with, or fully understand, these. Recent legislation has placed an obligation on public sector agencies to co-operate together on County wide strategies for service delivery (Local Area Agreements). For rural Counties DEFRA must seek to negotiate with the rest of Whitehall an arrangement by which this can be more comprehensively 'rural proofed'.

DEFRA should seek an obligation on public service providers to identify ways in which jointly delivering services in rural areas can both maintain and improve local access and help to retain and develop local community infrastructure and assets. We would commend DEFRA becoming more involved with the Audit Commission and the process of Comprehensive Area Assessment as a means of ensuring this dimension of rural delivery is properly addressed in all rural Counties. This is an area of work where DEFRA and the RRAFs should make maximum use of collaboration with the Government Offices of the Regions.

4. The timing and administrative arrangements for rounds of Comprehensive Spending Review, and the attendant changes to government machinery, is not an issue for us. The outcome for rural areas, however, does concern us and should be one of the goals for DEFRA. DEFRA seem to believe that rural proofing is being taken up across other Whitehall departments and in the regions despite the clear evidence to the contrary in the recent Rural Proofing Reports from the CRC. Government should immediately make this an enforced obligation across all relevant departments of government. To do this it will have to strengthen the lead role of both DEFRA and the Commission for Rural Communities and ensure greater co-operation by other departments by giving the DSO the greater strength of a PSA.

If it is not possible to make this change between rounds of CSR, DEFRA must place the highest priority on making a good start in negotiations to achieve this, and the resources needed to implement it, in the next CSR.

5. DEFRA's approach to assessing the strength of rural communities and the conclusions that it reaches would not be recognised by the many of those communities who are

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experiencing an ebbing away of investment and services. DEFRA should seek an agreement with CLG and DBERR that where planning and economic policy impacts on rural areas the first criteria for deciding where housing and economic development will take place will be the contribution that it will make to retaining viability of local services and infrastructure. This should be a central plank of planning policy both now and in future regional planning and economic policy, as well as in all rural Local Development Frameworks. As a result there should be a presumption in favour of incremental investment in the current public service infrastructure and settlement pattern, not the enforced creation of new ones.

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