

## Commission for Rural Communities

### Consultation response: 'Unlocking the talent of our communities'

#### **1. Introduction**

**1.1 The Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) has the following three roles:**

- **Listening to and representing the views of rural communities**
- **Giving expert advice**
- **Acting as an independent watchdog.**

**1.2 Our job is to provide independent advice to government and others to make sure that policies reflect the real needs of people living and working in rural England, with a particular focus on tackling disadvantage and economic under-performance.**

**1.3 We welcome the Government's intention to publish an Empowerment White Paper later in 2008. This short paper highlights some views and advice from our work which we commend to the attention of CLG.**

**1.4 Overall, we welcome the content of this report, specifically in encouraging active citizenship and strengthened local democracy, accountability and local public services. We do however, question how the main content of the document relates to the questions it subsequently asks as this is not very clear.**

**1.5 Many of the findings of the CRC's recent Participation Inquiry are relevant to the proposed content of the white paper. We highlight below the findings and recommendations from this inquiry where they are relevant.**

**1.6 Likewise, our Chairman, Dr Stuart Burgess, has been charged by the Prime Minister with providing advice to the Government on strengthening rural**

economies. Dr Burgess will be presenting his findings to the Prime Minister in May and he will be communicating with other relevant ministers, including within CLG. This report will also influence the views and advice we provide to the Government in responding to the Government's recent consultation paper on the Sub National Review<sup>i</sup>.

1.7 Whilst our particular remit relates to rural England the views and ideas we are recommending to the CLG's attention are, generally, not exclusively rural in content and can be applied to the governance of all local areas, whether rural villages or urban neighbourhoods.

## **2. Responses to the questions raised that the Empowerment White Paper will seek to answer**

2.1 *How can government at all levels work together to tackle worklessness and promote enterprise in the most deprived areas? What are the best means of coordinating social, economic and physical regeneration?*

2.1.1 In parts, the CLG's consultation paper reads as though deprived urban areas should be the primary focus for Government intervention. Certainly, interventions continue to be needed to tackle area based deprivation. However, there is clearly more to deprivation than an area focus<sup>ii</sup>. The CRC places a particular attention on those suffering from social and economic disadvantage and the hidden voices of rural England.

2.1.2 Our research has highlighted that both social and economic disadvantage can be hidden and overlooked in the more sparsely populated and geographically remote areas of rural England. We therefore place an emphasis on people that are deprived and not areas. Likewise, the value and the potential of community empowerment applies to all communities whether deprived or not.

- 2.1.3 The report our Chairman will be presenting to the Prime Minister on rural economies looks at possible causes of rural economic weakness, where this exists, and provides solutions to make rural economies stronger. Our proposed aim is to secure a step change in the performance and resilience of rural economies and in the commitment of the public sector to their future.
- 2.1.4 The evidence presented in the report demonstrates rural England's economic growth, with high employment rates, enterprise formation and innovation but also with weaker investment levels and lower productivity and with a need for employment increases needed in peripheral areas. The report identifies the unfilled potential of the rural economies with larger firms having the potential to earn much more.
- 2.1.5 We will separately send the review team a copy of this report when it is finalised in the next few weeks. We will also be sending a copy to relevant CLG ministers.
- 2.2 *What is the role of government in encouraging and supporting citizens to be active? What steps need to be taken to revive involvement in local civic and democratic roles?*
- 2.2.1 Between February 2007 and January 2008, the Commission for Rural Communities undertook a national inquiry. The inquiry explored the barriers and challenges that currently inhibit:
- Rural communities having greater influence over local decisions, and
  - Local councillors from becoming stronger democratic champions acting on behalf of their communities.
- 2.2.2 During our inquiry we found faults with local democracy and with local authorities. Too many people feel absolutely no connection with their local authorities and their local councillors. Our findings and subsequent

recommendations suggest a broader change of direction is needed towards greater trust and decentralisation to local government level (including the Parish and town council tier) to give local people a stronger voice and more influence over local decision making.

**2.2.3** We recommend more ‘Double devolution’. Government should extend more trust to local government. And local government should extend more trust beyond the town hall to local communities and neighbourhoods.

**2.2.4** While we recognise and welcome the move towards subsidiarity within the Central-Local Government Concordat, we also encourage greater clarity. We would like to see clear commitment to a statutory, constitutional application of subsidiarity. Specifically, the Government should embed a statutory principle of subsidiarity in the draft Constitutional Renewal Bill during this bill’s pre-legislative scrutiny.

**2.2.5** We also believe that local government, particularly the new unitary authorities, should extend greater trust and responsibility to local parish and town councils, particularly Quality Parish Councils.

**2.2.6** We are supportive of the model of parish or neighbourhood level governance (with parish and town councils being a natural ‘community hub’ around which communities can govern themselves), developed by Action with Communities in Rural England and the National Association of Local Councils. We commend this model to the attention of CLG and to the Government more widely.

**2.2.7** We encourage all principal local authorities to allocate neighbourhood budgets to local councillors for expenditure within their divisions and wards.

**2.2.8** We also encourage parish and town councils to involve their local residents more directly in spending decisions. Our evidence suggests that where communities are directly involved in setting and prioritising local taxation citizens have greater incentives and interest in engaging with local decision-making. Furthermore, local authorities and their respective town and parish councils feel more a greater sense of community buy-in toward taking local decisions and improvement projects forward.

**2.2.9** This should build on existing good practice. These neighbourhood budgets should be managed with appropriate guidance (including exploring the scope for co-funding opportunities) and also probity safeguards (e.g. ‘purdah’ regulations and public scrutiny). They should be managed through participatory budgeting principles, allowing local people a direct say in how some of their tax resources are spent within their neighbourhoods. They should be encouraged as a design feature for councillors in all the new unitary authorities and within the pathfinder authorities seeking to renew the ‘two tier’ structure where this remains.

**2.2.10** Local Strategic Partnerships should be given greater powers to draw down funding support from public agencies to deliver their Local Area Agreements (i.e. to deliver the objectives of their Sustainable Community Strategies).

**2.2.11** We support the Government’s recent legislation placing a duty on a wide range of public agencies to co-operate with local authorities and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) in planning and delivering Local Area Agreements (LAAs). We think this duty needs to go further. In the context of a new constitutional settlement between central and local government, LSPs must be able to access resources from a wide range of agencies, including, for example, the Regional Development Agencies, the Environment Agency and the Highways Agency, to deliver locally agreed targets and priorities.

**2.2.12** The costs of democracy should be met by taxpayers nationally; either central government should set up a ‘democracy budget’ to pay the election costs of the parish tier; or central government should achieve this objective by funding principal local authorities to manage and pay for all local elections.

**2.2.13** All possible efforts should be made to support parish councils to become fully elected representative bodies. We wish to create an environment where co-option becomes un-necessary as a substitute for elected parish councillors.

**2.2.14** We want all local authorities (and/or local county associations of local councils or Rural Community Councils or similar bodies) to provide ward and parish liaison officers to advise, inform and support councillors of all tiers in their work on behalf of their constituents, and also to help advise and support the work of parish council clerks.

**2.3** *How can the power of consumers be better used to improve local services? How can social housing tenants be given more choice and voice?*

**2.3.1** Both central and local government should commit to supporting very local community plans, such as Parish Plans and Market Town Plans. There is so much good practice in this area that the Government can learn from and promote. For example, the support given to Parish Plans by West Berkshire unitary authority<sup>iii</sup> and also the excellent DVD the West Berkshire authority recently produced<sup>iv</sup>. Further information about parish plans is also available from ACRE<sup>v</sup> and from the CRC<sup>vi</sup>.

**2.3.2** We would like to see significant progress (including piloting) made in the following areas:

- Community plans being clearly reflected within the statutory local authority wide Sustainable Community Strategies and also in the Local Development

Frameworks. Linked to this we urge local authorities to involve local authority officers, particularly planning officers, to support their local communities in the design and delivery of local community plans. And, the scope these plans to influence local SCS transparently communicated.

- **Local Strategic Partnerships and their Local Area Agreements reflecting the content and ambitions of community plans and committing to help the delivery of community plans. This will require local authority officers to advise and support the delivery of community plan objectives. This might require practical extensions of the ‘duty to co-operate’ to the local parish and town level. This could also include the development of Neighbourhood Area Agreements, managed by neighbourhood partnerships (including relevant local authorities) at the parish or town level.**
- **Further moves being made to encourage and incentivise parish clustering (where there is local agreement) to exploit the links and shared ambitions between neighbouring or linked communities and to help create economies of scale, where relevant, thereby helping the delivery of shared community objectives.**

**2.3.3 We recommend that the CLG works with the Local Government Association, the Improvement and Development Agency and others to promote and spread good practice in this area.**

**2.3.4 We support the Government’s proposed ‘Community Call for Action’, designed to enhance the role of councillors to raise local people’s concerns by demanding a formal response from local authorities. But we think this should go further, this ‘Call to Action’ should be for local people to use directly if they choose to, for example by local petitioning.**

**2.3.5 We urge the Government to work with the LGA, the NALC and others to bring forward proposals to achieve this outcome.**

**2.4** *What more is needed to encourage consistently strong local leadership? How best can we increase opportunities for communities to hold local public officials and representatives to account?*

**2.4.1** The CRC has argued the case for a structure of powerful new unitary authorities serving their communities, working closely with a renewed structure of empowered and influential parish and town councils. We remain supportive of shire local government re-organisation. We believe that unitary authorities will strengthen and clarify local democracy and local accountability. They should strengthen the Local Area Agreement contracts between central and local government and also strengthen the statutory spatial planning system. Unitary authorities will help shire local government to punch its weight with city regions and regional bodies. We continue to have uncertainties over the sustainability of the remaining two tier structure for these reasons.

**2.4.2** We are also supportive of the recommendation set out in the Councillors' Commission Report to place duties on Local Authorities to facilitate democratic engagement – particularly in reference to engaging with the Parish and Town Council tiers.

**2.4.3** We want councillors to communicate more effectively with their constituents. In particular, there should be an expectation that all ward councillors and all parish councils to provide an annual report to their constituents. Annual reports can be published in all sorts of different ways, they don't have to be traditional written reports. For example, councillors could use pod-casts or produce short films to place on relevant websites or use web-blogs. Whatever form these reports are in they should be communicated strongly to local people (for example, through council tax bills).

**2.4.4** We support the recommendation in the Councillors' Commission report that the Local Government Association and the National Association of Local Councils

should provide guidance to local authorities on clear role descriptions explaining to councillors and to local people what the roles and responsibilities of councillors are.

2.4.5 The success or otherwise of the new LAA regime will also be critical in strengthening local leadership and local accountability. We have advised central and local government that the success of this new regime will require successful rural and neighbourhood proofing to happen. Rural proofing LAAs will be about trying to ensure equitable delivery of area wide targets in rural as much as in other areas. This is about 'the mainstreaming of rural'. For many of the priority issues facing rural societies successful mainstreaming is capable of delivering a lot more than rural issues being ghettoised into a stand alone 'rural box'. Mainstreaming will involve ensuring that LAA delivery plans consider the risks of unequal access and take mitigating action. It will require monitoring on a neighbourhood level, in order that differences in delivery within an authority area can be monitored and then managed as necessary.

2.4.6 Delivery bodies will require management information in order to deliver their services and improvement targets equitably between neighbourhoods – and between different groups in their areas – unless they have a good reason not to. The story of place, with backing evidence, may provide such reasons for some areas (e.g. with area based regeneration needs).

2.4.7 For many LAA targets any delivery reporting will only make sense to local people and their representatives if it is done on a neighbourhood basis. Neighbourhood based monitoring is central to the future success of LAAs. This is, implicitly at least, the shared ambition of central and local government. For example, the Local Government White Paper makes it clear that "no-one should be disadvantaged by where they live". In this respect, this is not about 'Rural Proofing' so much as it is about 'Neighbourhood proofing'.

### **3. Conclusion**

- 3.1 The CRC look forward to CLG developing many of these recommendations further and consulting with relevant parties to ensure that they are introduced quickly and effectively.
- 3.2 The CRC is ready to assist advising and supporting the CLG in this work where we believe that reforms will have positive impacts on the quality of local democracy within our rural communities.

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<sup>i</sup> 'Prosperous places: taking forward the review of sub national economic development and regeneration' (March 2008)

<sup>ii</sup> For example, research in the south east shows that for some aspects of poverty and disadvantage there is as much and sometimes more to be found in rural areas as there is in more urban areas. See for example:  
<http://www.ruralsussex.org.uk/frontpage/East%20Sussex%20Briefing.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> [www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=623654](http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=623654)

<sup>iv</sup> <http://tv.westberks.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=11814>

<sup>v</sup> [www.acre.org.uk/DOCUMENTS/ruralevidencepapers/Parishplanning\\_rep.pdf](http://www.acre.org.uk/DOCUMENTS/ruralevidencepapers/Parishplanning_rep.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> [www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/Parish%20Plans%20Case%20Studies.pdf](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/Parish%20Plans%20Case%20Studies.pdf)