

## PRESENTATION FOR Y&H RRAF: 17 JUNE 2008

### Introduction

Graham invited me along today to talk about two linked things. First the letter that Hilary Benn send to David Stewart on the back of the Rural Vision event and which I think you will all have seen and second how Defra is approaching delivery of the new Strong Rural Communities Departmental Strategic Objective – so essentially how mainstreaming works.

### Hilary Benn's letter

First Hilary's letter. We thought it an ideal opportunity to make the messages available more widely in the absence of any formal rural declarations by the department for some time and as it was Hilary's first major rural speech. So it appears on our website in a prominent place.

I would like to pick out what I see as some important messages from the letter.

*“Strong Rural Communities are about enhancing the good things about rural England and addressing the challenges”*

- We wont be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. There is a lot that is good. That needs to be reinforced and made even better.
- But we are not complacent. We do accept that there are challenges.

*The main rural message remains essentially unchanged over the last 8 years.*

- That should not come as a huge surprise to us. Indeed, against rapidly changing priorities elsewhere it provides a degree of reassurance that is often difficult to find.

### *Farming and conservation Agenda*

- These areas of work are important to us. Indeed, the natural environment and climate change are the main focus for the department's activities – our PSAs.
- And farming, even though not necessarily the most important employer or economic activity in rural areas, is an integral part of the environment.
- Even though the natural environment and climate change represent the main priorities of the department (and there can be no apologies for that), that does not mean everything else is neglected.

*There is no lack of commitment*

- That's true at official as well as Ministerial level

- Read lots in the press about the number of civil servants dealing with “rural”
- Mostly based on a misunderstanding of the way in which Defra is organised and the way it relates to other departments.
- Any suggestion of the number of staff dealing with rural is almost certain to be wrong. Even in Defra, quite apart from the directly focused policy team we should not forget the RDPE team, the whole agriculture group, various natural environmental interests – the national parks etc – and our excellent professional support staff. And many of those (and some others) will have been counted against “rural” in the past. But mainstreaming means that rural is increasingly on others’ radar.

### *Its not just about Defra*

- Indeed, most policy interventions are for other departments. And that is a neat lead in to the mainstreaming agenda.

### DSO and Mainstreaming

Its worth just taking a few moments to examine what we mean by mainstreaming. What Government means is that the same or similar outcomes are achieved for those living in rural areas as for their urban counterparts. As a concept it is pretty simple. No rocket science here. The bottom line is that no-one should be unreasonably disadvantaged because of the place where they live.

Defra has a particular interest in ensuring that the message has indeed got through to all departments. And it needs to be able to measure success. As an aside, quite **how** departments deliver the outcomes – how they make sure that delivery is achieved in rural areas – is very much a matter for them and not an area where Defra will be second guessing.

First, reinforcing the message that “rural” is for all of us in Government. “We can ignore rural because Defra is responsible” is something I rarely hear nowadays. Our ambition is that thinking rural should just be second nature. Because Defra has the RA at the end of its name does not mean that we will do it all.

So its partly about choosing our priorities. They may arise because a policy area is particularly important and even though the responsible department is taking rural seriously – as it should, we still want to ensure we are fully on board in the process. Or there may be areas where we think that our expertise can help at an early stage.

Where do we start with all of this and keep on top of it? Of course it’s a huge enterprise trying to keep on top of all Government policies. But departments are aware of Defra’s interest in matters rural and will usually inform us at an early stage of policy development. We certainly seek to maintain an active engagement with them to ensure that this is the case. In some cases they will

seek advice from CRC on rural proofing policies. If for some reason we do not hear first hand, there is a strong rural grapevine, including CRC. And there are other opportunities in the policy development cycle for us to become involved. I would emphasise that its not all about Defra having to muscle in. Departments do genuinely seek our and CRC's help.

Now on to measuring success. The proof of the pudding, to misquote, is in the outcome. This is all about outcomes.

We plan shortly to publish the full DSO indicator set on our website. We have divided the indicators into two groups to reflect the two intermediate outcomes, roughly around mainstreaming and economic growth in low performing areas. But there is some read across between many of the individual indicators. To each indicator we have assigned a traffic light with green meaning performance at or above the national average, red meaning performance below the average with no sign of improvement and amber/green and amber/red in the middle.

I will take an example of each.

**Health** (covering a range of sub indicators) is green. Those in rural areas have a greater life expectancy, lower infant mortality, fewer potential years lost to cancer, fewer potential years lost to coronary heart disease etc etc. But that does not mean that we lose all interest in this as an indicator. We are currently considering whether the big picture might mask issues that warrant further investigation. For example whether there are significant differences between outcomes for rural poor and the rural average.

**Earnings** is amber/green. Rural jobs provide lower earnings than urban jobs but urban and rural people on average have similar levels of earnings as a result of commuting.

**Housing affordability** is amber/red overall. That includes individual red indicators like waiting lists as a percentage of housing stock. This measures the need for housing compared to the amount available within the district. As you might imagine, that is currently a key policy area for us.

What is the point of this indicator set? Given that the outcomes we are measuring are the responsibility of other departments, that would be a reasonable question to ask. The simple answer is that as long as we have a Strong Rural Communities DSO, it is important to be able to measure performance across the board – to get the joined up picture.

I mentioned earlier how we engage with other departments during the policy making process in order ensure that rural outcomes are appropriately considered. This indicator set gives us another door if we need it. If it becomes clear that rural areas have outcomes that are significantly worse than their urban counterparts, that gives us a starting point for discussion. Even if outcomes are apparently in line or better like health, there is no reason

why, on the basis of available information or even common sense, we should not look behind the headlines as we hope to do with some of the indicators.

Its worth returning briefly to what we actually mean by mainstreaming. In our terms its ensuring that when departments consider policy development, the outcomes are applicable to rural areas. It does not mean that delivery arrangements need be the same for urban and rural areas. It means not thinking “rural is Defra’s responsibility” . So the “ Only X people engaged on rural” suggestion I mentioned earlier is positively unhelpful because it helps reinforce that message – that Defra is responsible for picking up all rural issues. Rural is a Government policy and that’s broader than Defra.

How do we know its working at the various levels? The DSO indicator set is our touchstone at national level. It is possible, though not in our immediate plans, to break most of these indicators down to regional level. But that might be something the regional observatories would like to look at. What we will be doing is to provide a breakdown of indicators on the economies/productivity side as this will help us provide our own contribution to the Regional Economic Performance PSA where we are looking at intra regional disparities.

Given the role of this group in providing feedback as well as challenge to Ministers, I would ask the question of you. To what extent would you **want** to measure regional progress against the indicator set as a measure of mainstreaming (or how else would you measure it) and how you would go about it. And bear in mind we are interested in outcomes rather than processes.

And at the local level its really for the LAA system to define and pursue success in local terms within the LAA framework of 198 indicators. We have encouraged GOs to press Local Strategic Partnerships to use the rural/urban definition in developing the evidence base for the LAA and to challenge where the rural dimension is not sufficiently addressed. But its certainly not for Defra to start to set additional local rural targets, for example on service delivery and extend local reporting arrangements – I am sure we would be firmly put in our place if we were to suggest that sort of throwback to the previous system!