



Commission for  
Rural Communities  
Tackling rural disadvantage

# Report of the Rural Advocate 2007

Dr Stuart Burgess

The Rural Advocate is a non-political appointment made by the Prime Minister. The job of the Rural Advocate is to put the case for rural people at the highest levels of government, and to make sure that rural people's needs and circumstances are properly understood<sup>1</sup>. To do this, the Rural Advocate needs to hear first hand from the people who live and work in rural England, and from the organisations that support them.

The Rural Advocate is also Chair of the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), the government's statutory advocate, advisor and watchdog for rural communities. The CRC has a particular focus on people who are disadvantaged, and on areas suffering from economic underperformance.

Dr Stuart Burgess was appointed the Rural Advocate in September 2004. This is his second report<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2004) Rural Strategy 2004.

<sup>2</sup> His first report is Commission for Rural Communities (2006) Report of the Rural Advocate Dr. Stuart Burgess October 2006 CRC33.

# Report of the Rural Advocate, 2007

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# Introduction

Over the past year, I have been privileged to meet many hundreds of people who live or work in rural England. I have met long established rural residents and recent in-migrants; spoken with people active in their community and those who are not; held discussions with children, young people, older people, families and met with migrant workers, businesses, entrepreneurs and farmers. I have also heard from many voluntary and statutory organisations at local, regional and national level whose work impacts on rural communities.

Throughout my discussions, I have particularly sought out people whose voices may not usually be heard, and I have asked them to tell me what it is like for them living or working in rural England. What are they satisfied with and what concerns them? What helps and hinders them in their lives? And what actions are needed, by whom, to address their concerns? I have deliberately visited different types of rural areas – from small and remote communities on Holy Island in Northumberland, to busy market towns in the south east of England. On some occasions I have explored specific policy issues – such as Ashton Hayes' ambition to be the first carbon neutral community. At other times I have deliberately sought out people affected by particular events – such as the severe floods across England in June and July, or the livestock movement restrictions brought in to control Foot and Mouth Disease.

**In 2007, there were over 928,000 households in rural England with incomes below the official poverty threshold of £16,492 per annum.**

I have seen and heard many inspiring examples of good practice, success and outstanding initiative. Indeed for many, life in the countryside offers great advantages and benefits. People in rural areas tend to live longer, and have healthier lifestyles with a lower risk of obesity. Rural crime rates are lower, with burglary rates around half that of urban areas. Pupils from rural areas continue to achieve higher levels of academic attainment compared with those from urban areas. And many rural economies have rates of income, employment and productivity that rank amongst England's best. It is perhaps not surprising that rural areas continue to see a net inward migration, totalling 75,000 in 2004/5<sup>3</sup>.

However, this overall picture hides some complex patterns and trends, and I have also witnessed people in real hardship, sometimes struggling, and in very real distress. In 2007, there were over 928,000 households in rural England with incomes below the official poverty threshold of £16,492 per annum. This is equivalent to a city the size of the Birmingham conurbation. Yet because these people are dispersed throughout rural England, they tend to form a forgotten city of disadvantage. Young people are also leaving our rural areas – over the past 20 years, the proportion of young people aged 15-24 in rural areas has fallen from 21% to 15%. The rural population is getting older in some coastal locations, the median age is as high as 62.9 years old. And the lack of affordable homes to rent and to buy continues to be a serious problem. The average house price in rural areas is 8.1 times median income, compared with 6.8 times in urban areas.

Clearly it is not possible to do justice to all the issues, views and experiences that have been shared with me over the past year in this one report<sup>4</sup>. Equally, I do not wish to over-generalise. There are many diverse views and needs in rural England, and that diversity is one of the characteristics I most value. In this report, I have therefore sought to highlight the main themes and issues that people have raised with me in my discussions and activities over the past year as Rural Advocate, and to record where there are changes and similarities from my first report to the Prime Minister in 2006.

In **Section 2** of the report, I set out the main topics that rural communities have raised and where they would like to see action. In *thriving communities* I report on people's concerns and aspirations for the future sustainability of their communities, arising from the lack of affordable housing, the provision of rural services, the strength and diversity of rural economies and the role of the rural voluntary and community sector. In *fragile communities*, I report on certain groups within rural communities who are increasingly vulnerable, either due to a series of devastating events affecting farming businesses, the impact of the summer floods, because of poverty and disadvantage or as a result of their remoteness. Finally, in *changing communities*, I record the changes communities have most frequently raised with me as significant – the implications of an ageing population, increases in migrant workers and an increasing focus on sustainable development.

In **Section 3** of the report, I then reflect on the breadth of issues that people have raised with me and offer my view on, what I believe, are the key opportunities and challenges for rural communities today. I set out where I believe action is most urgently required to fully realise the potential of rural communities to contribute to wider society's aims, and to make sure that no-one suffers disadvantage simply because of where they live.

Finally, in **Section 4**, I set out what I will be doing over the next year in my role as Rural Advocate to make sure that the diverse needs and circumstances of people who live and work throughout England are recognised and understood. I welcome comments on my future plans so I can continue to be in touch with the needs of rural communities.

The audience for this report is primarily the Prime Minister and government. I also hope the report will be of use to the many organisations whose work impacts on rural communities. It illustrates how rural communities can lead the way in tackling some of the issues facing society today. But it also shows where hidden urban biases in policy and delivery need correcting, and where rural communities require targeted support and assistance to overcome some of the significant challenges they face. Most importantly, I hope this report will lead to action on the issues that matter most to rural people. I call on government and all those who have responsibility, to take this action forward. As Rural Advocate and Chairman of the Commission for Rural Communities, I look forward to playing my part.

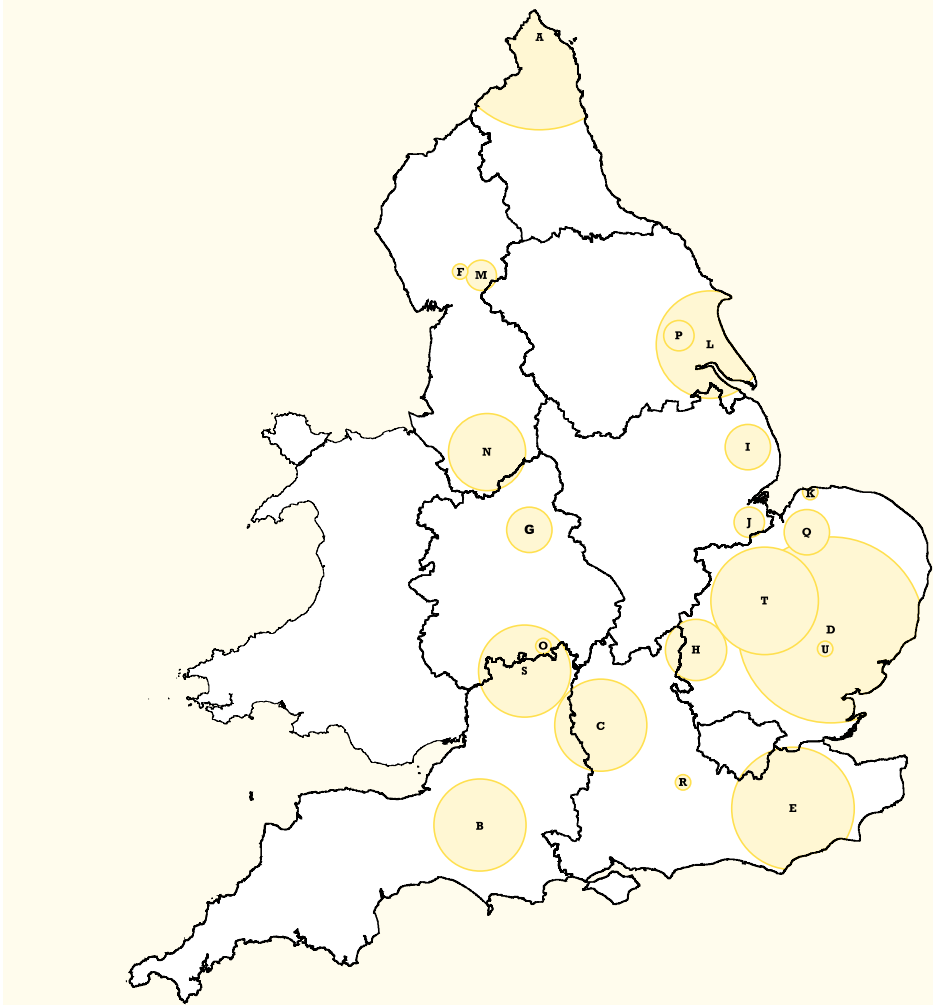
My thanks go to all the people who so freely and generously gave up their time to share their views with me over the past year, and who allowed me an insight into their lives. I am also grateful to the many organisations, and to the staff of the CRC, who have helped me reach out into rural communities, and who champion rural issues with such dedication and determination.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise referenced, all statistics throughout this report are taken from Commission for Rural Communities (2007) *The state of the countryside 2007* CRC46.

<sup>4</sup> To see detailed accounts of my individuals meetings and visits throughout the year visit [www.ruralcommunities.co.uk](http://www.ruralcommunities.co.uk)



Rural Advocate visits in 2007



A	Berwick on Tweed	L	East Riding
B	West Dorset	M	Cumbria
C	Oxfordshire	N	Cheshire
D	Suffolk	O	Evesham
E	Kent & East Sussex	P	Yorkshire
F	Cumbria	Q	Norfolk
G	Staffordshire	R	Surrey
H	Bedfordshire	S	Gloucestershire
I	Lincolnshire Coast	T	Cambridgeshire
J	Lincolnshire	U	Suffolk
K	Norfolk		
			Regional Boundary

## 2. What I have heard

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# What I have heard

## Thriving communities

Rural communities have always adapted and evolved over time to reflect changing needs and circumstances. Without this pattern of change, they would weaken and decline. However, people raised with me a number of areas which need to be addressed, if rural communities are to be able to continue to grow and to thrive as social, economically and environmentally sustainable communities. Four themes consistently came through in my discussions – the importance of affordable and appropriate rural housing; the accessibility of key rural services; the need for a strong and diverse rural economy and the role of the rural voluntary and community sector.



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## Rural housing

As in previous years, the shortage of affordable and suitable rural housing dominated many of my discussions. I heard sadly familiar stories of people being forced to move away from their family and friends, or remain living in cramped, unsuitable conditions, unable to afford a property to buy or rent on local incomes; of local communities' resentment at the large numbers of houses being 'lost' to second homes and now used for just a few of weeks of the year; of new housing development mismatched to local needs; and of the increasing frustration of growing numbers of people who see themselves as earning a good wage, but who feel trapped, not qualifying for social housing, but not earning enough to afford to buy a house.

People were passionate in their concern about the implications of housing problems for the health and vitality of their rural communities. They told me how, as a result of these difficulties, young people were leaving, trade in local shops was reducing, local businesses were struggling to recruit, school numbers were falling, and the numbers of volunteers for community activities were reducing. Without exception, all the communities I visited recognised that change and development was essential to help them grow and thrive in the future.

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However, smaller rural communities in particular told me of their fears that they were being written off by regional and local planning policies that directed development to 'more sustainable' larger settlements. I heard that local targets and timescales for building new affordable rural houses were inadequate to meet the scale of the problem. I was also told how the higher unit cost of delivering small developments in rural areas sometimes meant that rural housing schemes simply came too far down the priority list for the Housing Corporation to fund. The pressure on them to maximise the numbers of units they delivered for their set budget worked against rural areas. I also heard how planning and housing needed to work much better together, so that limited funds were not being tied up on schemes that were then not able to secure planning permission.

Whilst residents recognised the importance of growth, they were cautious of supporting new housing developments in their community without assurance that development would benefit local people, and remain for local benefit. Where these assurances were given, I witnessed tremendous examples of the community rallying behind schemes. For example, residents in the beautiful historic village of Great Massingham, Norfolk, unanimously supported a Parish Council initiative to provide 12 two and three bedroom affordable homes to buy and to rent. The success of their first scheme, five years ago, has now spurred the parish council, supported by the village, into developing a further scheme.

Overall, I have seen generally encouraging signs of change in the provision of new affordable housing within rural communities, with local people increasingly aware of how they can help solve the problem through housing needs surveys, local pressure and action. I visited an excellent illustration of the potential of community land trusts in Buckland Newton, Dorset. I have been impressed at the role that Rural Housing Enablers frequently play in bringing these, and other such schemes, to fruition.

Despite these welcome and positive signs, however, the overall message I hear from rural communities is still one of increasing frustration. New affordable houses are simply not being delivered on the ground quickly enough; local planning policies are not always supportive; and it is not always clear if the income from council tax on second homes is being used to benefit the local community. With almost one voice, people were demanding action to make the political will for more affordable rural housing get translated into houses on the ground, much, much quicker.

**Buckland Newton is a small village located in the heart of Dorset's Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, where average house prices are £337,000 for a detached home and £227,000 for a semi-detached<sup>5</sup>. Concerned at the threat posed by the lack of affordable homes, the Parish Council, with their District Councillor, commissioned a housing needs survey from Dorset's Rural Housing Enabler. Completed in 2004, the survey highlighted the need for some 20 affordable homes.**

**The parish set up a community land trust to develop a housing scheme, working in partnership with the local community, public and private sectors. The trust was committed to developing sustainable, energy efficient, affordable houses with high standards of design. Land was made available through an exception site policy at below market development value. However, it was also essential to keep build costs down, to make the homes affordable for local people on incomes of £10-20,000. Their solution provides ten affordable homes using low cost, sustainable building methods, with timber frame construction and straw bale insulation. Much of the building work will be done off-site using local suppliers and materials, helping to reduce time and costs.**

**It has been a long process for Buckland Newton – which is still ongoing – and they have had to overcome many challenges. Once completed however, the scheme will provide local people with ten new homes to either rent or to own a share, and their experience provides valuable lessons for others.**

5 [www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/in\\_depth/uk\\_house\\_prices/html/19uh.stm](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/in_depth/uk_house_prices/html/19uh.stm)

### Local services

Rural communities' anxieties about the continuing erosion of key services have been another familiar theme. This year, however, their concerns were particularly dominated by fears over the future of the Post Office network. I attended a number of consultation events with the Minister for Rural Affairs about government's plans for the network. From these, and in my other discussions, the importance that rural communities attach to post offices as a vital local service is clear. However, people generally recognised that no government would continue to provide the existing level of subsidy that the network receives. With new technology also allowing alternative ways of providing services traditionally delivered through a post office, such as buying vehicle road tax and stamps on-line, people accepted that some restructuring was inevitable. What rural communities, along with postmasters and postmistresses, desperately wanted, was clarity about the long-term vision for the Post Office network, with its 8,000 rural post offices, so that they could then explore creative local solutions for providing a Post Office service with some certainty.

**When the post office in Tealby, Lincolnshire, closed several years ago, the community managed to keep a Post Office service by operating from private houses and then the small entrance lobby to the village hall. But permission to operate from the village hall was running out and the threat of losing the Post Office service loomed once more.**

**The solution that residents developed was the Tealby Multi-Use Centre, combining a post office with a village shop and doctor's surgery. A store room adjacent to the village hall was rebuilt as a dedicated facility. The centre now has a part-time employed manager who runs the shop, with a rota of 22 volunteers. The post office deals with up to 240 transactions a week, with pensioners making up 80% of its customers.**

The other service that raised great passion was the delivery of health care in rural areas and the future of cottage hospitals. I heard from health professionals in Suffolk and Lincolnshire how the current Department of Health funding allocation makes insufficient allowance for the higher cost of delivering services in rural areas. It can be no coincidence that many of the largest Primary Care Trust budget deficits have been in rural areas. In Fenland, Cambridgeshire, I heard how funding mechanisms and changes in health care practices, such as the growth in day surgery treatment, have implications for rural residents wanting to access locally provided follow up treatment and rehabilitation services with physiotherapists and carers. Medical professionals and rural communities were worried that the changes they were experiencing were driven by professional health care perspectives that reflected urban circumstances and which were not being sufficiently rural proofed.

It was not just the physical loss of key services that so concerned people, but also the important contribution that local services make to the vitality and sense of community within rural communities. The village shop, the post office and the doctor's surgery provide somewhere to meet with other people; without these, people argued, it was so much easier for some to become increasingly isolated and excluded from their community. I saw that it was often the most vulnerable in society that lost out when a service disappeared. Members of Bridport's Older People's Forum echoed the concerns of many elderly residents I spoke with, who feared that they would have to move out of their villages, and away from their support networks of friends and family, if the shop or the doctor's surgery was closed.

The value that rural communities place upon local services is perhaps reflected in residents' willingness to take action to retain them. I saw numerous examples throughout the country where communities have devised creative ways to retain and deliver important services locally. I saw post offices relocated into village shops, community halls, pubs and churches; computer access being introduced into village halls; and churches doubling up as meeting rooms and music venues. In Cambridgeshire, I heard about innovative plans to explore how operating as a social enterprise business may offer an alternative way of managing the delivery of local rural health care services – bringing the delivery of services through the local cottage hospital and health centre together. The experience of these communities offers other rural communities valuable insights. I am pleased that, through the CRC, there is now an advisory service, Rural Services Support, to help communities keen to explore alternative delivery options and find creative solutions<sup>6</sup>.

Rural communities and local organisations are rightly proud of their achievements, finding creative solutions to retain key services. But residents and organisations also argued convincingly that their efforts should be better supported by funding allocations for key public services. In particular, they wanted public funding mechanisms to better reflect the additional costs of delivering services in rural areas, particularly across sparsely populated areas.

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## Rural economies

The economies of rural England are dynamic and diverse. They make an important contribution to regional and national economies with at least 5.4 million employees<sup>7</sup> and an annual turnover of £304 billion by rural firms. In the North West region, some 40% of all businesses are in rural areas and they employ 25% of the region's workforce<sup>8</sup>. My meetings with rural businesses have reflected this breadth and diversity – from a leading, high tech engineering company with an international customer base located on a small rural business estate on the edge of a Gloucestershire village, to a local bottling and pressing business in a farm unit in Yorkshire. The sense of entrepreneurship and drive amongst rural businesses is apparent, and their vitality and success, generating local employment, income and wealth, is a fundamental requirement of achieving sustainable rural communities. My involvement in England's first national Rural Entrepreneurship Conference<sup>9</sup> confirmed that this diversity and spirit of enterprise is equally alive amongst many of the business, public and third sector support agencies.

However, I have also been to rural areas with weak economic performance, often characterised by their small size, remoteness and dispersed or traditional business base. In areas such as the East Lincolnshire coast and West Dorset coast, I witnessed great determination amongst local authorities, market town partnerships and area based trusts, to bring communities together and develop and implement long-term visions to create more sustainable, prosperous futures.

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<sup>6</sup> For more information about the advisory service, visit <http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/events/ruralservicesupport>

<sup>7</sup> Office of National Statistics (2007) Annual Population Survey.

<sup>8</sup> Pion Economics, (2005) State of the Rural North West Region.

<sup>9</sup> This event was established by the Crichton Centre for Rural Enterprise of the University of Paisley, and held in February, with CRC sponsorship, at the University of Lincoln.

To achieve such visions requires determination and perseverance, but also clear and consistent policies. A specific concern of some of the coastal communities I visited was that their attempts to encourage inward investment were being thwarted by ambiguity around long-term sea defence policies. Both local and regional organisations asked for greater consistency in the policies of government and national agencies, so that they could take forward their work effectively at a local level.

Regional tiers of government have a big role to play in encouraging and supporting rural businesses and economies to achieve their potential. However, I heard from rural business owners that all too often they found that economic and business policies and programmes were implemented with urban areas in mind. One example cited was the Local Enterprise Growth Initiative, which seeks to boost enterprise in disadvantaged communities. In practice, business and local authorities told me that the urban focused criteria used to target this scheme results in rural districts being mainly ineligible. Quite rightly, rural authorities and businesses wanted to see programmes to support investment, provide training and encourage innovation, respond equally to the challenge of rural economic underperformance.

**Rural communities and businesses repeatedly argued for investment that would encourage higher value employment opportunities into the rural economy.**

**Communities along the Lincolnshire coast face a number of challenges – physically isolated, with a low wage, seasonal economy heavily dependent on tourism, weak infrastructure and an out migration of young people. The Coastal Action Zone Partnership was established in 2004 and brings together a wide range of public, private and voluntary organisations. It has been working to tackle disadvantage along the coast, and promote regeneration and increase investment.**

**Along the coast, the Mablethorpe Tourism Forum is working with local businesses to broaden Mablethorpe's economy as an all-year-round tourism destination. Initiatives have included a Mablethorpe marathon, a bathing beauties competition (an international competition for the design of beach huts), a sand yachting festival and arts and cultural events capitalising on the town's connections to D H Lawrence and Tennyson. They aim to put Mablethorpe on the map as a good place to live, work and visit.**

In particular, rural communities and businesses repeatedly argued for investment that would encourage higher value employment opportunities into the rural economy, to break away from low pay and seasonal work. They saw potential in developments in IT and knowledge-based jobs, and highlighted the importance of access to good quality broadband services to help small businesses develop. I spoke to one business couple who told me how Lincolnshire's investment in broadband, coupled with the incentive of one year's free use for businesses, had encouraged them to set up their own internet based home hardware company. This was one example of many that people shared with me, where such investment is helping to strengthen rural economies, as well as reducing the out migration of younger people from rural areas, and reduce commuting, helping to create more sustainable rural communities.

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### **Voluntary and community activity**

Wherever I have been, I have been impressed by the outstanding drive and commitment of individuals and groups volunteering their time, energy and skills to benefit their community. The scale and diversity of voluntary and community activity in rural areas is a real strength, and their experience can offer valuable insights for more urban areas, for example developing local community councils or in neighbourhood planning.

Rural communities are rightly proud of their voluntary achievements. Indeed that sense of community spirit and vibrancy is one of the main factors that people give me that attracts them to live in a rural area. It is also one of the aspects they fear will be lost if people are forced to move away, whether through lack of affordable housing or decreasing services or transport.

It was clear that easy access to small amounts of money could make a tremendous difference in encouraging local voluntary and community activity. I was also repeatedly told by people active in their community how much they valued the support and advice available to them from rural development workers – whether this was help with the complexities of funding applications, signposting to other information sources and good practice, helping to build community consensus, or providing encouragement when faced with yet another hurdle to overcome. This support was often provided through rural community councils or local authority partnerships. Equally, I heard how stretched these rural development resources were, and how long-term funding for such posts was frequently uncertain and insecure. In Norfolk, I heard that insecure funding had resulted in the county being on its fourth Rural Housing Enabler in five years.

One recurring theme in my discussions concerned the level of trust placed in rural communities. Throughout 2007, I chaired an inquiry by the CRC examining how rural communities can have greater involvement and influence over local decisions through their local councillors. From local councillors in Somerset, community groups in Hereford, to volunteers in Northumberland, I was told that local communities were not given enough influence over the decisions that affect their lives, nor sufficient autonomy to get on with managing their own, local affairs – whether that was maintaining local drains, or determining appropriate designs for new housing developments.

However, the inquiry also highlighted the widely varying capacity within parish councils and local councillors. Some councillors simply felt they did not get enough support and training to do their job; others felt overburdened with government red tape and bureaucracy; for some, the practicalities of covering large remote rural areas made their role more difficult. Whilst I heard much that was good and healthy in local democracy in rural England, it was also clear that rural residents and local councillors alike believe that, with appropriate support and real devolution of responsibility and influence, there is much greater potential in local community level government than is currently being achieved. They were keen to play their part to achieve this.

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**Gill has worked tirelessly to make life better for young people in her Lincolnshire village. A mum of two grown up children, she became concerned that all the activities and facilities available to local children required money, which not all families were in a position to afford. Initially funding her work through table top sales, her ambition grew, helped by local small grants, followed by a successful Single Regeneration Budget bid and then European funding. She initiated a local association, of which she is the Secretary. They now put on a range of activities and day trips for local children aged 5-15, advised by their junior committee. Gill described her work as the hardest thing she has ever done, but also the most rewarding.**





## Fragile communities

Many people who live or work in rural England can enjoy a relatively healthy and prosperous lifestyle. Rural areas overall have higher average incomes than urban areas; crime in rural areas continues at a lower rate than in urban areas; and rural areas have an overall higher employment rate at 78% in 2005, compared with 74% for urban districts. However, the picture is not so rosy for all. A significant number of rural people are unable to share in this high quality of life, with over 928,000 rural households with incomes below the official poverty threshold. For others, their wellbeing has been affected by significant external events. Here I report on four groups within rural communities who are increasingly vulnerable: as a result of a series of devastating events affecting farming businesses; due to the impact of the severe flooding across England in June and July 2007; because they suffer poverty and disadvantage; or as a result of their physical remoteness.

## Farming

My discussions at the start of the year, revealed to me a farming industry that was still fighting, but with a cautious sense of optimism for the long-term future – even if farmers were not sure when that better future would come. ADAS's survey of farmers in 2007 revealed 26% of farmers were happy to stay in farming for the foreseeable future, an increase from 15% in 1999 and 14% in 2002 (following the 2001 Foot and Mouth epidemic)<sup>10</sup>. There were small increases in milk prices; increased wheat prices, with several farmers I spoke with hopeful that this would eventually translate through to livestock prices; a developing market in bio-fuels; and increasing consumer interest in the traceability of food with, for some, farmers markets proving a valuable lifeline. I have again seen many excellent examples of creative and innovative farm diversification schemes, particularly amongst young farmers taking up new technology. I have also seen interesting examples of greater co-operation, such as the Cholmondley Food Hub in Cheshire linking producers, distributors and customers over a 50 miles radius. I remain hugely impressed by the energy, industry and determination of the farmers I have met.

In 2006, my meetings with farmers were dominated by problems with the (then new) Single Farm Payment Scheme, and I heard accounts of real distress and hardship caused by delays in payments. I subsequently took up this issue with the Prime Minister, Defra and the Head of the Rural Payments Agency. Meeting up with some of the same farmers in 2007, I was pleased to hear of some welcome signs of improvement in the scheme, albeit with the process still giving rise to concern. All farmers I spoke with are now looking keenly to Defra and the Rural Payments Agency to meet its commitment to make 75% of full payments by the end of March 2008, and 90% by the end of May 2008.

<sup>10</sup> ADAS UK Ltd(August 2007) Farmers' Intentions in the Context of CAP Reform – Analysis of ADAS Farmers' Voice 2007 Survey, Table 50.

The nature of my discussions changed significantly in the latter half of 2007. In a series of devastating events for the farming industry, hundreds lost crops in severe summer flooding in June and July. Outbreaks of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD), Blue Tongue virus, and then Avian flu have resulted in some farms losing their stock, and many more have been affected by movement restrictions. Swift action by government has helped to contain these outbreaks. However, the impact of movement bans has been widespread. I argued strongly that FMD restrictions were lifted in low risk areas as soon as possible, and I was pleased that government took this action as soon as they were able to. But the farming community is still urgently calling for a vaccine for Blue Tongue virus to be ready for spring next year, and is looking for a lead from government on the long standing debate over bovine tuberculosis (TB) and badgers.

I met several farmers across the breadth of the country who suffered repeated hits from this series of external events, many losing tens and in some cases hundreds of thousands of pounds. One farmer in Gloucestershire I met reflected a common story – he had had to keep his cattle for longer than planned due to an outbreak of bovine TB; he was just about to sell them on when FMD movement restrictions were brought in; his farm was then flooded. Not only did he lose potential income from flooded crops, but he now had to pay out for concentrates and feed to keep the cattle he was prevented from selling.

Government action to provide immediate relief and financial compensation for these events has been welcomed. However, many farmers I spoke with questioned what they saw as inadequate levels of compensation. How to support and compensate farmers who suffer such unforeseen events will be a major issue for the government, the insurance industry and farmers to resolve for the future.

**Sheila and Derrick Pride were the first farmers to be affected by the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak in Surrey. Their stock was culled and their farm business closed. When I visited the Prides, Sheila told me, “We felt gutted when we discovered we had foot and mouth and it has been a very difficult time for us, and for other people affected. Our farm shop had to close and we have lost a lot of income. However, we have been supported by so many people, including one woman who phoned from Australia, and we are now looking forward positively to the future. All the support we have received locally has restored our faith in humanity”.**

Even before these events, hill farmers had been telling me of the extent of long-term stress and associated illness now found in the farming community. I heard how farmers were becoming increasingly stretched, working longer hours, reducing farm maintenance and time for family life as they were forced to take on other income earning work. Pension provision was a growing anxiety for many livestock farmers. One Cumbrian farmer told me how, several years ago when he had sought professional financial advice on pensions, he had been told to look out of the window – his stock was his pension. Today, stock prices do not provide this level of financial security and they are in no position to afford to invest in a pension.

However, the level of stress that farmers were now reporting was sadly all too visible. I heard about rising debt and increased calls to GPs. Farmers repeatedly told me how they felt their situation was worse than in the 2001 outbreak of FMD and warned that the full effects would not be felt for a couple of years. Organisations such as the Farming Help Partnership<sup>11</sup> have proved invaluable; proactively offering timely, practical advice and small grants. The government's £1 million grant to support their work is welcome. Their role has highlighted the importance of having the core infrastructure in place to deal with such unforeseen emergencies.

Fundamentally, however, farmers consistently told me that they now urgently needed a long-term vision and new strategy for the industry developed in partnership with government. This would need to address what they saw as the inevitable restructuring arising out of the events of 2007. It would also be an opportunity to explore issues of increasing, and sometimes conflicting, demands on the use of land – for food production and food security, bio-fuel production, to provide housing, to meet environmental objectives etc – and help develop a more positive role for farming within wider society.

**The level of stress that farmers were now reporting was sadly all too visible.**

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## **Flooding**

June and July 2007 saw incidents of unprecedented and severe flooding across England. I visited Evesham at the height of the floods, then Gloucestershire a few months on after the immediacy of dealing with crisis had passed. I also visited affected communities, business and farmers in the Yorkshire and the Humber region. One woman I met exemplified the tremendous spirit and courage shown by all. At 94, she had refused to be evacuated from her home when it flooded to two feet. She remained, living in a caravan by day, walking through the rubble of her house downstairs to return to her bedroom at night, with her daughter bringing her hot meals.

As the long clear up operation began, people in rural areas told me that they felt the scale of flooding in rural villages and hamlets had been largely overlooked in public consciousness, with attention focusing on larger settlements and urban areas. They were worried that continued attention on all areas was necessary to make sure that the most vulnerable and needy did not miss out. They predicted that the recovery process would be likely to take up to three years, and I witnessed how far reaching it would need to be – addressing issues of mental health, financial security, the capacity of the voluntary and community sector, tourism and business confidence and vitality. The Association of British Insurers has estimated that the physical damage alone is over £3 billion<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> The Farming Help Partnership comprises ARC-Addington Fund, Farm Crisis Network and the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution.  
<sup>12</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/6954892.stm>

I was struck by the strength of the voluntary and community sector response to the floods in rural areas, and I pay tribute to the many remarkable stories of volunteer assistance that I heard, both during the crisis and its aftermath. One example, amongst many, was the work of Gloucestershire Time Banks. With BBC Radio Gloucestershire, they ran a Good Neighbourhood Scheme, matching the many public offers of help to people in need – sometimes delivering water, redecorating houses, or providing furniture.

I was also struck by the positive effect that providing people and businesses with timely and easy access to support, advice and small grants was having. Recovery schemes run by the South West Regional Development Agency, Yorkshire Forward and the Farming Help Partnership showed how much statutory and voluntary organisations can do, to bolster people's resilience and ability to help themselves. Unfortunately, such schemes were not available consistently to businesses and communities in all affected areas, so I also heard from people confused and distressed, running down their savings, and not knowing what support they may be eligible for, or where to go for advice.

Looking ahead, what concerned rural communities and businesses most was the probability that such flooding events would occur again, and, that as they lived or worked in rural areas, they would be a low priority for any flood defence spending from limited local authority and Environment Agency budgets. There was a sense that rural areas would have to pay the price for protecting urban settlements – without any transparent acknowledgement, public debate or compensation. They feared a double hit – not only would they be likely to be flooded again, but without flood protection measures, their ability to get insurance in the longer term would also suffer.

**The Gloucestershire Village Agents scheme<sup>13</sup> provides older people in rural Gloucestershire with easy access to information and services. During the floods and in the recovery process, their local contacts and knowledge is proving invaluable at making sure vulnerable people are reached and supported. Their work for elderly people across rural Gloucestershire has been diverse – arranging Meals on Wheels for people forced to move away from their home; organising temporary registrations with doctors' surgeries and making sure there is no interruption with prescriptions; helping deal with insurance companies when documents have been lost in the floods; and taking people back to their homes so they can begin to understand and deal with what they have lost.**

People demonstrated an impressive self-help attitude, willing to take individual action to defend their homes, businesses, and community buildings against future flooding. Indeed I heard about some remarkable plans already in progress – including villagers in Deerhurst, Gloucestershire who had raised £15,000 to undertake technical surveys and develop a planning application to increase the height of their floodbank and upgrade the local water pumping station. However, businesses and residents recognised that they really needed to plan and develop such schemes in the context of wider, area based plans and strategies for flood defence. They were keen to engage in the development of these, soon, so that their futures were not left hanging in the balance.



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## Poverty and disadvantage

There are over 928,000 households scattered throughout rural England who live below the official government poverty threshold of £16,492 household income per annum. If they were brought together they would form a city the size of the Birmingham conurbation and would merit concentrated attention, with special schemes and initiatives targeted to improve their opportunities and wellbeing, and bring their standard of living up to that expected in an advanced and prosperous country. However, because their disadvantage is scattered and hidden throughout rural England, the clear message from rural communities and the organisations that support them was that they feel their needs are largely forgotten.

I witnessed this pattern of disadvantage throughout my visits, with people in need hidden by the apparent affluence of their surroundings and the averaging of official statistics. The nature of their disadvantage was diverse. I met people on low and uncertain incomes, employed, for example in short-term tourism jobs, and heard from local Citizens Advice Bureaux about the increasing number of debt related calls they were receiving. Ensuring that people knew about and took up the benefits they were entitled to was another further challenge they raised with me. I met people with poor access to services and jobs; and people feeling isolated and excluded from the society around them, feeling the stigma of seeking help, particularly where the existence of poverty was denied by a prevailing view of the countryside as a rural idyll.

At the Bedfordshire Rural Affairs Forum, as elsewhere, I heard how the nature of rural disadvantage can make it a challenge to identify people in need and to deliver the services they need. One impact of this is that demand for a service can often be hidden, and it was only when outreach work is undertaken to provide a service that the demand and need for that service is revealed. This was illustrated to me in Yorkshire, where the local Citizens Advice Bureau experienced a significant increase in demand for its services, when it set up remote information hubs in the Beverley and Holderness area. I also heard from organisations about the difficulty they were having attracting funding into areas which appear relatively affluent, but where there are pockets of deprivation. In Dorset, local organisations and authorities responsible for improving people's lives shared with me some of the difficulties they had accessing resources when funding mechanisms are based upon the Indices of Deprivation. They argued, as I heard elsewhere, that the consequence was that disadvantaged people in rural areas were losing out, as funding flows to areas where disadvantage is more concentrated and visible.

**The nature of rural disadvantage can make it a challenge to identify people in need and to deliver the services they need.**

One recurrent theme throughout my visits was the importance of raising low aspirations, particularly amongst young people, in breaking the cycle of deprivation. Training and education were seen to play a critical part in this. However, the lack of suitable transport to access such opportunities was frequently cited as a problem, particularly for people in more remote areas. For instance, I heard how young people in Berwick taking up training and further education (FE) opportunities now have to spend four hours a day on a coach travelling to Newcastle. Not surprisingly, the number of young people in Berwick taking up FE is falling. Encouragingly, I also heard of initiatives by some universities, such as Lincolnshire, Cumbria and Cornwall, to reach out to the rural communities in which they are based, by establishing college outposts in the smaller towns. Communities and organisations wanted to see more encouragement for FE and higher education providers to provide outreach services into remote areas. They argued for sufficient funding for flexible transport provision – such as wheels to work schemes – to help their young people take up training and educational opportunities. They also stressed the importance of encouraging business development and growth within rural areas, to provide young people with rewarding local employment opportunities to aspire to.

Joanne offers an outreach service, helping people with a disability across rural Holderness claim the benefits they are entitled to. Much of her work is with people whose initial applications have been turned down, and who are not able to physically access the support and advice located in the towns. She helps people understand the forms; supports claimants with doctors' assessments so they include the appropriate medical information to support their claim; helps people with transport to Hull for their appeal hearings – a real challenge with some of her more severely disabled clients; and represents them at appeal. 80% of the cases she takes to appeal are successful. She works on a voluntary basis, charging people a token amount for her time and travel costs. She has never advertised her services, demand has spread by word of mouth. And as more people across the rural villages become aware of the help she offers – help that would not otherwise be accessible to them – demand for her services continues to grow.

Above all, the overarching message that I took away from rural communities and from the organisations that work to tackle rural disadvantage was that government's policies and funding to address deprivation and disadvantage need to be more effectively rural proofed. People made the case that it should be people, not places, which become the target for support. This was particularly important to address the scattered nature of deprivation in rural areas and to ensure equitable outcomes for the individuals who live there, as well as those who happen to live in more urban centres.



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## Remoteness

Over 600,000 people live in sparse rural areas, and one theme that has persisted throughout my discussions is how remoteness can increase communities' or an individual's vulnerability. This was apparent in my visits to geographically isolated rural areas, such as Holy Island in Northumberland which has no cash machines or personal banking facilities, but also, and perhaps less obviously so, in my discussions with people living in rural areas perceived to be 'accessible', such as Sussex and Oxfordshire. I heard of continuing difficulties for people who live in the countryside, but who do not have access to their own transport and for whom the countryside can be an isolating place. As one young man I spoke with said,

**“It's hard to get out and meet others when your last bus is at 6pm”.**

I have already mentioned how isolation from services or other people is a key factor in rural disadvantage, and I have stressed communities' concerns over the erosion of services to remote and sparsely populated rural areas. Equally, I have seen examples of creative outreach services to provide otherwise inaccessible facilities and advice. In Sussex, I visited the Rural Youth Bus, a heritage lottery funded project that tours around villages on weekday evenings, providing young rural people with somewhere to go. Importantly, youth workers on the bus also give young people an opportunity to discuss problems and offer one to one support. Unfortunately, as with other schemes I visited, the funding for the bus was due to end and there was no immediate prospect of alternative funding becoming available.

Communities perceived a general trend to centralising services into towns and cities, to achieve lower costs, and some times higher quality. When centralisation is applied to health services, communities were particularly concerned that it was resulting in people being forced to travel further for treatment when feeling very ill, for example to receive chemotherapy treatment. They argued that to prevent the most vulnerable losing out, the additional cost and time involved in delivering services to rural areas needs to be factored into funding decisions, rather than simply making the service user bear the brunt of extra travel costs. They also wanted to see greater investment in rural community transport to overcome the potential isolation of rural people without private transport.

In addition to the physical isolation from services and facilities, I also heard concern about the vulnerability of individuals to social isolation and loneliness in remoter rural areas. Whilst these problems are obviously not limited to remote areas, remoteness was clearly a factor in making it harder to seek support when it was required, and in maintaining vital support networks of family and friends. The loss of young people from villages was felt quite keenly in this regard, with the availability of affordable housing and diverse employment opportunities again seen as part of the solution.



## Changing communities

Rural communities are changing. The CRC's 'The State of the countryside 2007' report shows there are now nearly 400,000 fewer young people aged 15-24 in rural areas than 20 years ago. This is against a trend of a rising rural population overall. Between 1995 and 2004 rural districts saw an increase of over 7% (or 37,000 per year) in the number of new businesses registering for VAT. There has been a near doubling of land devoted to oilseed rape as an energy crop between 2005 and 2006; and a 3.6 fold increase in wind power capacity. And, due to the climate changing, there are now almost 400 vineyards in England and Wales, altering the landscape, and bringing new skills and employment opportunities.

Three of the most significant changes rural communities consistently raised with me were the impact of this demographic change, the change in the nature of the rural workforce, and the increasing attention being placed on climate change.

## An ageing population

The median age in rural areas is over 5 years higher than urban areas, and the gap seems to be widening. Between 2001 and 2004, it increased from 42.2 to 43.6 years, compared with 36.9 to 38.0 years in urban areas. In particular areas of the countryside, such as East Devon, this figure is even higher, with a median age of 62.9 years. Equally, over the last twenty years the proportion of younger people aged 15-24 in rural areas has fallen from 21% to 15%.

Rural communities see the loss of young people from their villages as a real threat to their future diversity and sustainability. They want to see much more done to attract and retain young people and provide them with the opportunities and incentives to stay in the area they were born, or to return if they choose. The importance of housing and employment came to the fore once more.

Equally, I heard how increasing numbers of older people were putting pressure on the viability of some rural services, such as schools and youth services, and straining others, such as social care and the suitability of local housing. Doctors in Sussex reported neglect and lack of care as a particular concern for elderly people who stay in rural areas, where they try and cope with limited visits from carers.

Some of the challenges associated with an increasingly elderly rural community are already being addressed. I heard of an excellent scheme by West Suffolk Age Concern which offers a free of charge 'Welcome Home Service'. This helps elderly residents live independently again after health treatment, for example by accompanying them home to turn on the heating, doing their shopping and cleaning, or transporting medical equipment.

Older people are a key part of the fabric of any community. My visits confirmed that initiatives that help them continue to live independently in rural areas, and/or help them contribute through employment or volunteering are both necessary and valued. Such initiatives bring improvements to individuals long-term health prospects, their quality of life and to the vitality of rural communities.

**In Dorset, the Rural Community Council and Association of Parish and Town Councils are working together to introduce broadband and computer access into every village hall. They are then working with Help the Aged to offer computer training, so that elderly people across rural Dorset can access more services and keep in touch with friends and family.**

## Migrant workers

Over the past four years, rural areas have experienced over 200% growth in the number of migrant workers, over three times the growth rate for urban areas. A large proportion of migrants are from the A8 accession states<sup>14</sup>, coming to work in England under European regulations that permit freedom of movement for work. Some migrants are transitory, following seasonal employment demands. Others come to stay and settle for longer periods in one place.

I heard from a wide range of rural businesses how essential migrant workers were to them, and to the wider economy. In Lincolnshire, local businesses leaders told me how migrant workers underpinned the viability of their rural economy. In a meeting with Norfolk businesses, I heard how migrant employees formed an essential part of their workforces. Recognising that migrant workers from Europe had a wide choice of places to work, these businesses were supportive of measures to target and attract migrant workers to England so that the economy could continue to benefit. They also commented that the skills that migrant workers were bringing could be better utilised, if qualifications from abroad could be better benchmarked with UK qualifications. I also heard many examples of the rich cultural diversity that migrant workers were bringing into rural areas, with festivals, music and new food shops and restaurants opening up in market towns such as Boston, Thetford and Swaffham.

**Rural areas have experienced over 200% growth in the number of migrant workers.**

What was also clear was that the speed and scale at which people have taken the opportunity to move around and relocate between countries for work has caused some challenges for rural areas. Local authorities shared with me some of the difficulties they now have, trying to plan for and provide local services, for example with schools needing additional money for dual language text books, and the demand for translation services for legal and advisory services. At the same time, they were also trying to look ahead and assess and plan for the implications of changes in future patterns of migrant working – for example if significant number of Polish migrants return to Poland, as the Polish economy develops.

I also heard how the pace of change was creating some tensions for social and community cohesion – particularly in some rural communities that have seen little change for many years. People stressed the need for two way understanding – to help migrant workers understand the English culture, and to help rural communities overcome any insularity and misunderstandings. I heard how several voluntary organisations, such as META<sup>15</sup> in Norfolk and Suffolk, are successfully using community development approaches to tackle such integration issues head on.

The confusion and blurring in the media between the status of migrant workers, asylum seekers, refugees and immigration issues was widely seen as unhelpful.

Several organisations pointed to the potential supportive role that the national media could play to help address community cohesion issues. They remarked how successful the media had been at raising the public consciousness and outrage at some of the continuing exploitation of migrant workers – denied their employment rights, not being properly paid for their work, or living in unsuitable housing conditions. Many supported the idea of national, regional and local campaigns that recognised and promoted the positive contribution of migrant workers to English life.

East Cambridgeshire District Council has developed a scheme where employers can buy workers' time by the hour. People register the hours they are available to work, and then receive a text message to inform them where and when they are required. The scheme fits the flexible requirements of employers and migrant workers, in an efficient transaction. One reason the scheme has proved so popular is that it is open to all potential employees – not just migrant workers from overseas. Migrant workers using the scheme therefore avoid feeling that they are being stigmatised.

A common theme with whomever I was speaking was the importance of speaking and understanding English. Difficulties arising from language barriers were one of the main issues that organisations supporting migrant workers reported. The migrant workers I met had varying standards of spoken English, although the majority were keen to learn. From their perspective, however, they found it difficult to access some of the help provided. Courses were not timed around shift work, there were no crèche facilities, or teachers were unable to explain words in their own language. Businesses were keen to support their employees to learn English, but, particularly for smaller rural businesses, they were sometimes uncertain who to approach or how this might be facilitated.

There is a growing body of good practice and experience that authorities and organisations working to support migrant workers are enthusiastic to share and learn from. Early in 2007, I chaired a CRC event showcasing some of the good practice in supporting migrant workers across rural England. Underpinning the need to share such information and experience, and to learn from urban areas, however, was always a consistent and heartfelt plea for more responsive and appropriate funding. This was seen as essential in allowing local authorities, and the voluntary and community sector, to respond to the changing and unprecedented growth of migrant worker populations in some rural communities, and to meet the needs of all local people, both established communities and migrant workers.

## Sustainable development

The public profile and attention given to climate change issues has continued to increase over the past year. With it, there has been increasing government attention on the importance of sustainable development, addressing the social, economic and environmental future of the country, whether urban or rural.

As I have previously mentioned, several of the smaller rural communities I met felt that their future as sustainable communities was being written off by current planning and spatial policies. They saw a 'check list' approach to understanding sustainable development categorising them as too small to support services. As a result development was being directed to larger, 'more sustainable' settlements, and their social and economic sustainability was undermined. I heard that community planning approaches and parish plans offered a partial solution to this – enabling communities to have a greater say and influence over their future. In practice, however, parishes told me that the necessary links for their parish plans to inform Local Development Frameworks, Community Strategies and Local Area Agreements are not always there.

14 The A8 accession states are the countries that joined the European Union in 2004 – Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Slovenia, Slovakia.

15 Mobile Europeans Taking Action is a voluntary organisation that provides support, advice and training to migrants across Norfolk and Suffolk  
<http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/publications/ruralmigrantworkersprojectsnorfolkandsuffolk>

In contrast, I saw several examples of small rural communities leading the way in demonstrating their potential to contribute to environmental sustainability goals. I was pleased to visit Ashton Hayes in Cheshire, which is aiming to be the first carbon neutral rural community. The parish has calculated its carbon footprint, and residents and local businesses are working together to reduce emissions. The village school has been a big driver in the project, as well as the local pub, in communicating the benefits of energy saving. In their first year, the village has achieved an impressive 20% reduction in its carbon output. I also saw interesting examples of community-led renewable energy schemes, where community ownership of the process and direct benefits for the community, appear to have helped overcome potential objections, for example in the siting of wind turbines. These examples provide a practical way that communities can connect with the challenges of tackling climate change. To encourage such action to be replicated more widely, and to help stimulate and motivate local action, communities were keen for a way to set their contribution to sustainable development goals within a local, regional and national framework.

**Smaller rural communities felt that their future as sustainable communities was being written off by current planning and spatial policies.**

**In June 2007 the Parish Council at Skeffling opened its new wind turbine, providing all the electricity needs for its village hall. They had initially investigated installing gas piping, but the cost was too high. A wind turbine was suggested, initially as a wild idea. But with some dedicated work by a few volunteers in the village, a successful funding application, and a steep learning curve, the turbine became a reality. It now generates up to twice the electricity needed by the hall, with the excess sold back to the national grid. The profit provides a maintenance fund for the turbine. Not content to rest on their laurels, the parish's next project is to install broadband into the hall, and set up a website to share their experience with other villages.**

A particular rural dimension to sustainable development is the increasing debate on the potential future uses of rural land. Research by the CRC indicates that between 2005 and 2006, there has been a doubling of the area of farmland devoted to oilseed rape for energy, and a 3.6 times increase in wind power capacity over the last three years. People saw increasing and potentially conflicting demands on the future use of land – asking what the relative importance should be between providing food and food security; providing bio-fuels, renewable energy and energy security; supporting water and flood management, addressing increased flood and drought risk from extreme weather and rising sea levels along coastal areas; meeting demands for recreation and leisure; and providing for housing and development.

There was no sense of preferred options for the use of rural land. Instead, complementing the message from farmers, I heard a request for an open and public debate on the future role of land, and within this, recognition for the positive contribution that rural areas and rural communities can play in achieving more sustainable development and tackling the challenges of climate change.



### 3. My reflections

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# My reflections

## Overarching themes

Over the past year I have witnessed tremendous community spirit and vitality within communities across rural England. I have seen numerous examples of enterprise and business entrepreneurship, initiative and opportunity – of which this report can only begin to illustrate. For many, I have heard the countryside is a good place to live or to work. However, it is a complex picture.

Throughout my discussions, I have been struck by the diversity within rural England. Within areas of affluence and prosperity, it is clear that there is a significant proportion of people who are struggling and in need of support. I have witnessed how their vulnerability is sometimes triggered by external and unforeseen events, sometimes exacerbated by the remoteness, sparsity and economic characteristics of the rural area in which they live; and sometimes hidden by apparent wealth and a perceived image of the countryside as a rural idyll.

**It is clear that there is a significant proportion of people who are struggling and in need of support.**

The actions required to tackle the disadvantage faced by some individuals living in rural areas, and the wider challenges faced by rural communities are diverse. Responsibility for these actions also lies at many levels. Throughout the past year, I have shared the views expressed with me, and potential solutions, with Ministers and other organisations. I have also highlighted specific issues where urgent action is required, for example to address the consequences of Foot and Mouth Disease and flooding. I will not repeat the detail of all those messages here. Instead, I highlight some overarching themes, before looking at three priority policy areas for action where I believe government has the opportunity to demonstrate its leadership in bringing about a real improvement in the wellbeing of rural communities.



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## Overcoming disadvantage

Throughout my work as Rural Advocate it is apparent that the scale of poverty and disadvantage in our rural areas needs to be better recognised. The hidden and scattered nature of rural deprivation means it can be all too easily overlooked, masked by apparent affluence and the averaging of statistics. But it simply cannot be acceptable in a modern and prosperous country that some of the most vulnerable people in society miss out on vital support simply because of where they live. The forgotten city of 928,000 rural households who are on incomes below the official poverty threshold deserve better. They deserve equity of opportunity alongside people who live in more urban areas.

The CRC's report 'Rural Disadvantage: priorities for action'<sup>16</sup> sets out over 20 detailed actions for government and others to tackle rural disadvantage. I commend this report to Government to take forward the areas it is responsible for. The underlying message, however, that I take from rural communities and the organisations working to support them, is that government policies need to be become better at reflecting the scattered and hidden nature of rural disadvantage. Policies and funding mechanisms should be rurally proofed to make sure they are capable of targeting people in need, rather than places. By doing so, support will flow to individuals, wherever they happen to live, rather than focusing on concentrated, more urban, areas of disadvantage.

There is also a challenge for further education and higher education providers, particularly colleges and universities within sparse rural catchments, to make sure that their services reach out into rural communities. They have a potentially important role to play in raising low aspirations and breaking the cycle of deprivation.

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## Better rural proofing

The importance of rural proofing is a common theme. But I continue to receive disappointing messages from communities about the extent to which rural needs and circumstances are taken into account in national, regional and local policy development and delivery. This is backed up by the CRC's report 'Monitoring rural proofing 2007'<sup>17</sup>, which concludes that the commitment to rural proof government policy is not being delivered consistently and tends to be reliant on the approach of individuals rather than built into the day-to-day work of departments.

At a national level, all government departments have a responsibility to ensure that rural needs are consistently addressed at all stages of policy development, ratification and implementation. This needs to be embedded within departmental systems, processes and cultures. Much more use could be made of the Office of National Statistics' rural and urban definitions to understand, assess and monitor the potential impacts of policy implementation in different geographic areas. Regionally, the Regional Rural Affairs Fora, working with Government Offices, also have an increasingly important role to play in rural proofing regional strategies.

The current emphasis on devolution, place and mainstreaming within government agendas provides an opportunity to rethink how rural proofing is taken forward. The CRC is ready to work with and across government, and other organisations, to make sure this is achieved.

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<sup>16</sup> Commission for Rural Communities (2006) Rural disadvantage: priorities for action CRC29.

<sup>17</sup> Commission for Rural Communities (2007) Monitoring rural proofing CRC52.

### Fair resource allocation

It is apparent that rural communities are facing many changes. If they are to adapt to these changes and tackle them in ways that support their development as socially diverse, economically prosperous and environmentally healthy communities, they will need help.

The loss of young people, an increasing ageing population and a trend towards increasing centralisation of services are just a few of these challenges. I have been impressed by the many examples I have witnessed where communities have demonstrated innovative ways of providing and retaining key services, often working in partnership with public and private sectors to devise creative ways of joining up and integrating service delivery. I believe creative local solutions for integrated service delivery offers a way forward for rural communities, particularly in more scattered and sparsely populated areas. The good practice and lessons already learnt should be shared much more widely to enable other communities to benefit and learn from existing experience.

However, I believe it is also right to question the extent to which rural communities should be expected to take action themselves to secure vital local services, and where service provision should be better supported through government policy. A policy of public service reform that aims to improve quality, efficiency or choice through a process of competition alone will fail many rural residents. In rural areas meeting the aspiration to 'deliver better public services for all' has to focus on the community as a whole, recognising the wider social and community benefits local services bring to rural life.

National policy decisions and funding mechanisms therefore need to become better at reflecting the social benefits that local services contribute, as well as the additional cost of delivering services in rural areas. It is interesting to note that government's own analysis of local government finances shows that areas with no large cities generally have the lowest levels of revenue spending<sup>18</sup>. Government Offices in the regions will have an increasingly important role to play in ensuring that rural areas receive fair and equitable resource allocations through the development of new Local Area Agreements.



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### **Adapting to change**

Climate change is an increasingly important issue facing communities – whether rural or urban. Rural communities have an important role to play in helping government meet its objectives for sustainable development, and to contribute to achieving the carbon reduction targets proposed in the Climate Change Bill. There are several examples where rural communities have demonstrated the potential of community initiatives to stimulate public action and engage individuals in action to mitigate climate change. The experience and good practice of villages like Ashton Hayes should be promoted and replicated more widely. There is an opportunity for Defra to take a lead in encouraging rural communities to fulfil this potential, and to encourage community initiatives within a local, regional and national framework.

Adapting to the challenges of climate change also brings into question how, as a society, we wish to make best use of land. I have heard increasing debate about the emerging and competing uses of land. I would encourage Defra to reinvigorate a national debate on how we make best use of this precious and limited commodity – land. This should consider our relative emphasis on food production and food security, on the production of bio-fuels and renewable energy, its use for housing, business growth, recreation and nature conservation, and its role in water and flood management. This debate should result in a new vision and strategy for land, and the role of farming within this.

I believe the future for our hill farming communities merits particular attention. There needs to be stronger recognition that the management of these upland landscapes and environment has a real economic and social value, alongside the production of food and crops. I urge government to consider establishing a Commission on the Future of Hill Farming, to examine how such areas can be managed in the future to deliver the benefits that society wants to see. The recent work of the Crofting Commission in Scotland may offer some useful insights on how we can renew these fragile rural and farming communities, and I would be pleased to explore how the CRC could support this process.

**The challenges of climate change brings into question how, as a society, we wish to make best use of land.**





## Priorities for action

Perhaps the most pressing challenges that rural communities face, relate to the intertwined issues of meeting the housing needs of rural communities and the development of strong and vibrant local economies.

A strong and vibrant rural economy with diverse employment opportunities and the availability of suitable and affordable rural housing to buy and to rent is essential for maintaining the social diversity of rural areas, to enable people to retain support networks of families and friends, and to support the growth and viability of local services. Underpinning these, in a sustainable community, is the ability for local people to exercise control and influence over the decisions that affect their lives.

Concerted leadership from government on these three key areas, would, I believe, lead to real and tangible improvements in the wellbeing of rural communities – particularly for those most in need. It would tackle the issues that concern rural communities most, and help rural communities realise their potential contribution to government's objectives and targets for sustainable development.

**I very much welcome the attention that rural housing issues are now receiving within government.**

## Delivering more affordable rural housing

Despite some signs of progress, the lack of suitable and affordable rural housing to buy and to rent remains the most frequent and urgent issue rural communities raise with me. Evidence on the scale of national rural housing need is extensive and well researched. What I heard repeatedly, and support calls for, is action now, to translate the political will for more affordable rural housing into more affordable homes on the ground. The focus should be on enabling small housing developments, responsive to local needs, with high quality design that is in-keeping with the fabric and character of the local area. This will enable rural communities to adapt and thrive.

I very much welcome the attention that rural housing issues are now receiving within government, together with some of the policy changes government has made in response to the Affordable Rural Housing Commission's report last year<sup>19</sup>, such as the helpful policies that are now provided by revisions to Planning Policy Statement 3.

I am also pleased that government has reintroduced targets for new affordable housing development in rural areas. However, feedback from rural communities is that delivery of these targets is being impeded by some allocations and policies in Regional Spatial Strategies. The department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) needs to ensure its targets for rural development are properly reflected in Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS). I welcome the announcement in the Housing Green Paper of a review of RSS, and I would urge CLG to give specific attention to policies that are being used for the provision of housing in rural areas. The review also provides an opportunity for CLG to encourage local authorities to respond to the housing needs of their rural communities.

Government announcements in the latter part of 2007 to increase funding for affordable housing were also very welcome. I would encourage CLG to now set targets for investment in settlements of less than 3,000 population and settlements of 3,000 to 10,000 population. It should then ensure the delivery of these investment targets by seeking an increase in the funding allocations made by Regional Housing Boards for rural affordable housing.

Against these positive announcements, I was disappointed at the intention to reduce Capital Gains Tax on second homes. In some rural areas the proportion of second homes is very high; for example they total nearly a quarter of homes around Brancaster, on the north Norfolk coast. As I have reflected previously, this can significantly affect local housing affordability and the sustainability of communities. I would urge government to consider removing this tax reduction from the sale of second homes. I also would ask CLG to give greater encouragement to local authorities to create a separate fund for all the revenue raised from council tax on second homes, for local reinvestment. This reinvestment should be used to address the housing and other needs of rural communities that are affected by levels of second home ownership.

**I welcome the immediate measures government took to mitigate the impact of animal disease events.**

There is currently much interest in the contribution that Community Land Trusts (CLTs) can make to meeting local housing needs. I am pleased that the CRC is sponsoring a national demonstration project to support and learn from CLT initiatives across the country. This project aims to identify and resolve the legal, technical and administrative problems surrounding the formation and implementation of CLTs, and explores the extent to which they can deliver good solutions effectively and in ways which can be easily replicated. I look forward to sharing the lessons from this demonstration project.

In 2007 I chaired the CRC's conference reporting on progress one year on from the Affordable Rural Housing Commission's report. As Rural Advocate and through the CRC, I will continue to monitor and press for progress on this most urgent of issues.

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### **Strengthening rural economies**

Strong and vibrant rural economies underpin rural sustainability and they already make significant contribution to regional and national economies. In light of the outbreaks of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) and the floods during 2007, I was asked by the Prime Minister to prepare a report on ways in which government could further strengthen our rural economies. I have shared my initial ideas and proposals with the Prime Minister and his advisors, and will be presenting a full report early in 2008. I look forward to working with government to see how my advice can be taken forward.

In particular, the events of 2007 showed how parts of our rural economies and communities are vulnerable to environmentally triggered disruptions. They need help to recover from these events, to put in place changes for future protection and to manage and mitigate against future risks. Past events emphasise the importance of continuing to provide help long after the media spotlight has turned away.

I welcome the immediate measures government took to mitigate the impact of animal disease events, such as the lifting of movement restrictions as soon as possible and financial support packages. Similarly, I welcome the more detailed consideration that the Inquiries established by the Prime Minister under Sir Michael Pitt and Dr Iain Anderson bring to the handling of flooding and FMD. With the CRC, I have met with Sir Michael Pitt and with Dr Anderson's advisors and we have agreed to share our advice to ensure that the impacts on and needs of rural areas are well represented. In developing longer term measures, I would encourage government, with Regional Development Agencies, to consider establishing a standing recovery fund, to help businesses maintain and restore activity after future environmental and disease events. Through the CRC, I would be pleased to work with Defra in 2008 to bring together the insurance industry, land-based industries and representatives of small rural businesses to resolve how to increase cooperation on contingency planning and enhance financial protection and compensation for future events.

The investment mechanisms government has introduced over recent years to encourage local economic development and regeneration, such as Local Enterprise Growth Initiative (LEGI) and the Local Authority Business Growth Incentive (LABGI), are very welcome. However, feedback from rural businesses and local authorities show that their reach needs to extend better into rural areas. I would encourage the department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) and Communities and Local Government (CLG) to lead action across government departments, and with local authorities, to explore how to extend and reinforce the reach of LEGI and LABGI, or their replacements, to make sure they equally address the needs of rural economies, especially those which also suffer from low levels of enterprise and employment.

The Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills also needs to take up the challenge set out by NESTA (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts) to work with CRC and Defra, to ensure that its new Innovation Strategy has a recognisable rural dimension. The potential of a rural innovation initiative, to support and stimulate innovation in rural areas and encourage high value development of products, processes and services, merits further investigation.

The Sub-National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration provides a welcome opportunity to consider how rural areas, as well as urban areas can be assisted to achieve their full economic potential. I would urge BERR and CLG to pay particular attention to policies and strategies that acknowledge and strengthen the role and contribution of rural areas, whether within larger areas such as city regions, or in alliance with similar rural districts in some of our more remote and peripheral places.

One particular challenge will be to ensure that access to high quality broadband services are available throughout rural areas. The CRC has raised this issue through the Broadband Stakeholders Group (BSG), the government's leading advisory group on broadband. I look to BSG and BERR to champion this requirement in its discussions with Ofcom about the next generation of access networks.

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### Supporting rural voluntary and community action

Finally, I am constantly impressed by the passion, commitment and sheer hard work of the significant numbers of volunteers who devote their time and energy to support others in their community, and who contribute so much to the vitality and spirit of many rural communities. I have seen many tremendous examples of ingenuity and initiative and I am frequently inspired by what people can achieve. Often it can take just a little funding, advice or support to make a huge difference.

The strength of voluntary and community activity is a huge asset within rural communities, which I believe should be cherished and nurtured. However, I have heard a Catch 22 dilemma in many of the rural communities I have visited. The local voluntary and community sector does a really great job helping to meet the needs of many disadvantaged people in our rural communities. But part of the reason they do this is because of real necessity, because of the relative lack of statutory service provision. This in turn, is driven, I am told, by resource allocation formulae which do not reflect the cost pressures faced in providing many services in rural areas (largely time, distance and travel related).

**The strength of voluntary and community activity is a huge asset within rural communities, which I believe should be cherished and nurtured.**

I would urge Defra, as the rural department of state, to take a lead in resolving this. During 2008, it needs to work with the Office of the Third Sector, CLG and other relevant departments to review the current and future health of the voluntary and community sector within our rural areas. This includes a hard look at whether the government's 'mainstreaming' approach, to avoid rural funding being separated from mainstream funding, is working as well as in practice as it ought to in theory. The danger is that mainstreaming leads to some of the current rural funding streams to the rural third sector simply being turned off.

CLG also needs to review the distinct role of parish and town councils and their armies of volunteer councillors. For example, the failure to include parish and town councils within the government's plans for the transfer of assets from principal local authorities to voluntary and community sector bodies is, in my view, misguided. It should be reviewed urgently. It should be explored as part of the current piloting of the transfer of assets initiative.

Likewise, Defra needs to work with CLG to review the resource allocations underpinning local authority (and other) service provision in rural areas, to make sure they take sufficient account of the costs of rural delivery.

In both cases the CRC is ready to contribute and advise.

The CRC's participation inquiry has recently published its final report and conclusions<sup>20</sup>. It argues a convincing case for reforms in our local and neighbourhood governance systems and for reforms in the role of our local councillors, to serve rural communities more effectively. I commend this report to government.

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<sup>20</sup> Commission for Rural Communities (2008) Participation inquiry strengthening the role of local councillors CRC55, January 2008.

# 4. Looking ahead

## In this section:

- 
- My work in 2008 36

# Looking ahead

Twenty percent of the population live in rural England, yet it remains an ongoing challenge to ensure that the needs of rural communities are not lost within wider, sometimes more urban dominated debates.

As government develops its policies, I will continue to work with them, as Rural Advocate and through the work of the CRC, to help them understand and respond to the distinct features and characteristics of rural areas.

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## My work in 2008 will include:

- Listening to rural communities about the provision of health care for people in rural areas and considering the potential implication for the government's NHS review.
- Continuing to monitor and press for action to increase the number of affordable houses to buy and to rent in rural areas.
- Checking how rural communities who have suffered so badly as a result of events in 2007 are faring, including those affected by Foot and Mouth Disease and flooding.
- Exploring how rural communities can contribute to achieving society's sustainable development goals, including the opportunities for encouraging more sustainable rural transport policy and initiatives.
- Understanding better the needs of children and older people in poverty and how they can be supported to make lasting improvement in their quality of life.
- Monitoring rural communities' access to key services, such as rural schools.
- Supporting rural communities through the changes to the Post Office network and monitoring the effectiveness of the consultation process in rural areas.

I will continue my programme of visits to hear directly from rural communities, organisations and businesses around the country. Details of my visits will be published on the CRC's website, with accounts of what I have heard, and what action I am taking. I will report regularly to government and all other organisations who need to know, on what I find.

I will also examine how I can make better use of the website to make it easier for more people to share their views with me, as well as explore ways of reaching people who are not comfortable with or able to access such technology easily. Although I cannot respond to every issue raised with me, I will use the views and experiences people share to shape my activities and focus my listening.

Many other organisations play an important role in understanding and championing the needs of rural communities. I will work closely with the Regional Rural Affairs Fora, Rural Community Councils and elected representatives so that we can share our information and experience effectively.

Finally, I commit to reporting back to government and rural communities on my activities; and on the views and experiences people share with me about the opportunities and challenges for rural areas to fulfil their potential contribution to a diverse, prosperous and environmentally healthy future, for everyone, wherever they live.





# Annex 1

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## Summary of priority areas for action

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### Overcoming disadvantage

**Page 27:** The CRC's report 'Rural Disadvantage: priorities for action' sets out over 20 detailed actions for government and others to tackle rural disadvantage. I commend this report to Government to take forward the areas it is responsible for.

**Page 27:** Government policies need to become better at reflecting the scattered and hidden nature of rural disadvantage. Policies and funding mechanisms should be rurally proofed to make sure they are capable of targeting people in need, rather than places.

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### Better rural proofing

**Page 27:** At a national level, all government departments have a responsibility to ensure that rural needs are consistently addressed at all stages of policy development, ratification and implementation. This needs to be embedded within departmental systems, processes and cultures.

**Page 27:** Much more use could be made of the Office of National Statistics' rural and urban definitions to understand, assess and monitor the potential impacts of policy implementation in different geographic areas.

**Page 27:** Regionally, the Regional Rural Affairs Fora, working with Government Offices, have an increasingly important role to play in rural proofing regional strategies.

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### Fair resource allocation

**Page 28:** The good practice and lessons already learnt [from local solutions for integrated service delivery] should be shared much more widely to enable other communities to benefit and learn from existing experience.

**Page 28:** National policy decisions and funding mechanisms need to become better at reflecting the social benefits that local services contribute, as well as the additional cost of delivering services in rural areas.

**Page 28:** Government Offices in the regions will have an increasingly important role to play in ensuring that rural areas receive fair and equitable resource allocations through the development of new Local Area Agreements.

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### Adapting to change

**Page 29:** The experience and good practice of villages like Ashton Hayes [encouraging personal and community action to tackle climate change] should be promoted and replicated more widely.

**Page 29:** There is an opportunity for Defra to take a lead in encouraging rural communities to fulfil [their] potential [to contribute to climate change mitigation], and to encourage community initiatives within a local, regional and national framework.

**Page 29:** I would encourage Defra to lead a national debate on how we make best use of this precious and limited commodity, land. This debate should result in a new vision and strategy for land, and the role of farming within this.

**Page 29:** I urge government to consider establishing a Commission on the Future of Hill Farming, to examine how such areas can be managed in the future to deliver the benefits that society wants to see.

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### **Delivering more affordable rural housing**

**Page 31:** The department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) needs to ensure its targets for rural development are properly reflected in Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS). I welcome the announcement in the Housing Green Paper of a review of RSS, and I would urge CLG to give specific attention to policies that are being used for the provision of housing in rural areas. The review also provides an opportunity for CLG to encourage local authorities to respond to the housing needs of their rural communities.

**Page 32:** I would encourage CLG to now set targets for investment in settlements of less than 3,000 population and settlements of 3,000 to 10,000 population. It should then ensure the delivery of these investment targets by seeking an increase in the funding allocations made by Regional Housing Boards for rural affordable housing.

**Page 32:** I would urge government to consider removing [Capital Gains] tax reduction from the sale of second homes.

**Page 32:** I also would ask CLG to give greater encouragement to local authorities to create a separate fund for all the revenue raised from council tax on second homes, for local reinvestment. This reinvestment should be used to address the housing and other needs of rural communities that are affected by levels of second home ownership.

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### **Strengthening rural economies**

**Page 33:** In developing longer term measures, I would encourage government, with Regional Development Agencies, to consider establishing a standing recovery fund, to help businesses maintain and restore activity after future environmental and disease events.

**Page 33:** Through the CRC, I would be pleased to work with Defra in 2008 to bring together the insurance industry, land-based industries and representatives of small rural businesses to resolve how to increase cooperation on contingency planning and enhance financial protection and compensation for future events.

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**Page 33:** The Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills also needs to take up the challenge set out by NESTA (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts) to work with CRC and Defra, to ensure that its new Innovation Strategy has a recognisable rural dimension. The potential of a rural innovation initiative, to support and stimulate innovation in rural areas and encourage high value development of products, processes and services, merits further investigation.

**Page 33:** I would urge BERR and CLG to pay particular attention [in the Sub-National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration] to policies and strategies that acknowledge and strengthen the role and contribution of rural areas, whether within larger areas such as city regions, or in alliance with similar rural districts in some of our more remote and peripheral places.

**Page 33:** I look to the BSG and BERR to champion this requirement [for access to high-quality broadband services throughout rural areas] in its discussions with Ofcom about the next generation of access networks.

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### **Supporting rural voluntary and community action**

**Page 34:** I would urge Defra, during 2008, to work with the Office of the Third Sector, CLG and other relevant departments to review the current and future health of the voluntary and community sector within rural areas. This includes a hard look at whether the government's 'mainstreaming' approach, to avoid rural funding being separated from mainstream funding, is working as well as in practice as it ought to in theory.

**Page 34:** CLG also needs to review the distinct role of parish and town councils and their armies of volunteer councillors. For example, the failure to include parish and town councils within the government's plans for the transfer of assets from principal local authorities to voluntary and community sector bodies is, in my view, misguided. It should be reviewed urgently. It should be explored as part of the current piloting of the transfer of assets initiative.

**Page 34:** Likewise, Defra needs to work with the CLG to review the resource allocations underpinning local authority (and other) service provision in rural areas, to make sure they take sufficient account of rural costs.

**Page 34:** The CRC's participation inquiry has recently published its final report and conclusions. It argues a convincing case for reforms in our local and neighbourhood governance systems and for reforms in the role of our local councillors, to serve rural communities more effectively. I commend this report to government.



For more information about the  
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