



West Midlands Rural Community Council Network:

The changing face of support for rural communities.

Introduction

In November 2002, Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, invited Lord Haskins to carry out an independent review of the arrangements for delivering the Government's policies in England following the creation of Defra (Department for the Environment, Food & Rural Affairs). This included consideration of all the relationships Defra has with the national bodies it funds (or part funds), which includes the Countryside Agency, English Nature, National Parks Authorities and Broads Authorities, British Waterways, the Rural Development Service, Regional Development Agencies and the Environment Agency.

The review took 8 months to complete and around 350 organisations, authorities and groups contributed to the review. Lord Haskins details 33 separate recommendations for improving the delivery of rural policies in his report. These policies can be viewed in full in Annex 1 of the report 'Rural Delivery Review' or on the Defra website at: www.defra.gov.uk/rural/ruraldelivery/report/text/annex1.htm

These policies will have a significant impact on the delivery of services to rural areas in the future, and these will be examined in more detail in the next section.

In addition to the work undertaken by Lord Haskins, there has also been a significant piece of work undertaken by the Active Communities Unit (ACU) of the Home Office to develop a strategy regarding the Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure. The strategy proposals arise from the 2002 Treasury Cross-Cutting Review of the voluntary and community sector's role in public service delivery. This highlighted the need for a strategy to ensure "a sustainable baseline of infrastructure support at local level, regionally and nationally". Further details can be found on the Home Office website at: www.homeoffice.gov.uk

The ACU was tasked to develop this and was allocated a fund of £93 million to implement it. The consultation was launched at the NACVS Annual Conference on 17 September 2003, with responses invited until 22 December 2003.

The final version of the strategy is not yet available however there are again significant implications for the rural voluntary and community sector in the consultation document, which will be explored in the third section of this briefing.

Over the next two years, the landscape of support for rural communities will change...

Rural Strategic Engagement Fund 2

The Network has secured £171,002 through the Regional Strategic Engagement Fund (RSEF) to assist the partnership of rural community councils develop their engagement in regional policy and strategy development over the next 3 years.

The fund, made possible by grants of £2.072 million from AWM and other partners, is managed by RAWM with an aim to 'provide capacity building support to regionally significant communities/communities of interest to enable them to engage in regional policy and strategy development'.

Under the rural theme, the Network will now be in a better position to reflect the needs and views of local rural communities to those who are making decisions about strategic planning. The objectives of the Network are to increase the opportunity for consulting and listening to rural needs, develop tools for gathering issues raised locally and representing a regional picture whilst assisting local communities understand the regional agenda and feel able to influence it.

This paper is one of a series of policy papers produced by the West Midlands RCC Network covering a range of topics. For a list see reverse, for hard copies contact the Network Co-ordinator, 01684 580862 or visit www.wmrccn.org.uk to download.

The Haskins Review

One of the key messages in the Haskins Review is that policy development should be managed separately from the delivery of policy. Lord Haskins paints a picture of rural delivery in the future where delivery is much more decentralised than it is currently, with key decisions being taken at regional and local levels. He believes that this is where services can most effectively address public need and where deliverers can be held more clearly to account. He argues that the Countryside Agency's role in delivery should cease. Margaret Beckett, the Secretary of State, does not concur with Haskins' view that the Countryside Agency should be disbanded, and has argued that their policy development role is important. Rural Community Councils are specifically mentioned as having a valuable contribution to make to delivery process as advisers and facilitators.

Lord Haskins five key themes for change are:

- To improve accountability through a clearer definition of responsibility for policy and delivery functions
- To bring delivery closer to the customer by devolving greater responsibility to regional and local organisations for the delivery of economic and social policy.
- To develop a more integrated approach to sustainable land management by rationalising agencies with overlapping agendas into a new agency responsible for sustainable land management.

The ACU Infrastructure Review

What is voluntary sector infrastructure?

Infrastructure, in the ACU consultation document, is defined as any organisation that plays a role in supporting, co-ordinating, representing, policymaking and/or development of local voluntary and community organisations. The ACU consultation document recognises that there are infrastructure organisations which offer generalist support within a geographical area, such as Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS), and those which offer specialist support to specific communities or client groups, such as Rural Community Councils (RCC) or Volunteer Bureau (VB). They have therefore defined a number of key functions which need to be delivered by infrastructure organisations, which are:

- **Start-up / Development support for individuals/groups of individuals** developing new organisations to meet new needs and /or plug gaps in provision
- **Information, advice and assistance** including best practice and funding and finance opportunities
- **Advocacy / Representation;** providing a representative and accountable voice for Voluntary and Community Organisations (VCOs) to policy makers, service planners and funders

- **Partnership Building / Brokerage;** bringing together VCOs and other public and private sector organisations for joint/co-operative policy making, planning and service delivery
- **Policy and Research;** collecting and providing evidence on the needs, role and developments within the VCS in order to influence policy, planning and service delivery

Specialist infrastructure is defined in the document as

- Volunteering
- Black and minority ethnic Voluntary and Community Sector
- Social Enterprise
- Community Development
- Rural Communities
- Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

Lord Haskins



(Note: Margaret Beckett, the Secretary of State has recently confirmed the statutory independence of a new agency, which will bring together elements of the work done by English Nature, the Countryside Agency and Defra's Rural Development Service.)

- To improve the co-ordination of delivery by enhancing the role of Government Offices for the Regions as co-ordinators and monitors

- To make things better for the customer and get greater value for money for the taxpayer through a more integrated approach to regulation and through simpler services

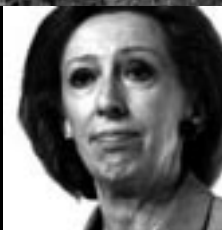
Defra are currently creating a detailed work plan that will outline which of Lord Haskins recommendations will be implemented, how and within what timescales. This work plan is expected by the summer 2004.

One of the key impacts for rural communities and voluntary sector organisations will be the result of the debate about what structure is used to undertake rural programme delivery. Options range from Regional Development Agencies, such as Advantage West Midlands, who currently have an economic

regeneration focus, rather than the social or environmental focus of the Countryside Agency, to County level organisations or structures (new or existing), which may not be the most cost efficient way of distributing funding. Whatever option is ultimately chosen, the rural community and voluntary sector will see changes to the way in which information is given and funding is distributed. If Lord Haskins vision is realised, then the process for the end user will be more transparent and cost effective. However, all organisations involved in rural programme delivery must ensure that the changes do not result in greater confusion and inaccessibility, even in the short term.



Margaret Beckett,
Secretary of State
for Environment



Throughout the document "Local" level refers primarily to local authority, unitary authority; borough or district.

As part of this consultation process Defra also published a policy paper "Community Capacity Building and Voluntary Sector Infrastructure in Rural England".

The paper describes the particular needs and issues of rural communities and the range and type of organisations providing services to rural communities. It puts forward a proposal for support structures in rural areas which might encompass:

- Effective networking and co-ordination of "frontline" community development, volunteer support and expert advisor staff

- An agreed means of delivering support to towns and villages with each district throughout a county
- Incorporation into all Community Strategies (district and county)
- Consistency of community support relative to need throughout the county
- Protocols and service level agreements between, for example CVSs, VBx CAB, RCC, local authorities (and other providers) clarifying roles, delivery responsibilities and possible funding support
- Consideration of case for mergers and/or new organisations
- Shared back office functions (ICT, information, insurance etc.)

- Common training and learning provision accessed by all parties
- Co-ordinated small grants provision with consideration of common gateway
- Wider network for information, good practice exchange, learning and representation including community organisations (parish councils, WI Young Farmers, village halls etc.) at district, linked to county, linked to regional level

The ACU and Defra have made funds available to County consortia, whose purpose will be to evaluate the current infrastructure support provision in rural areas and consider future ways of delivering this support.

continued overleaf

Rural Community Councils hope that this delivers integrated infrastructure support tailored to the needs of the voluntary and community sector in rural towns and villages with economic and social regeneration achieved through locally devised projects. RCCs recognise the important role that empowering individuals and volunteers has in building a community's ability to undertake projects. Equally important is supporting community governance, structures such as Parish and Town Councils. Any development of infrastructure support to rural communities and voluntary organisations will need to take account of these factors.

Although the final document, following the consultation paper, has

Conclusion

Over the next two years, as the recommendations of the Haskins Review and the work undertaken as part of the ACU Infrastructure Review are implemented, the landscape of support for rural voluntary organisations and community groups will change. Whether this is because

not been published there are some key challenges for current infrastructure providers. The ACU and Defra's emphasis on functions rather than organisations has highlighted their desire to see less duplication of services and a more comprehensive support service for all voluntary organisations and community groups. Implicit within the consultation document is the need for closer collaboration between existing organisations and development of new services to fill gaps. Removing strategic and organisational barriers in service delivery could lead to major changes in the way in which services are planned, funded and delivered in future. This will undoubtedly result in differences on the ground for current users and for infrastructure support organisations.

new organisations come on the scene to deliver programmes to rural communities, or existing organisations expand their remit, the challenge for everyone will be to ensure that new systems and structures are clearer and more accessible than those they seek to replace.

The West Midlands Rural Community Council Network draws together the four rural community councils (RCCs) which operate within the region. Each member RCC is an independent charitable organisation with a broad range of member organisations including parish councils, voluntary and community organisations and village halls, and has access through newsletters and mailings to over four thousand groups and individuals throughout the region. The RCCs have the common aims of promoting voluntary action and improving rural life. Across the West Midlands the RCCs have a combined turnover of over £3.75 million and employ over one hundred full time equivalent staff providing technical and professional support on issues and projects to people in local communities.

Useful websites:

www.defra.gov.uk/rural/ruraldelivery/report/text/annex1.htm

www.wmrccn.org.uk

www.homeoffice.gov.uk

www.rawm.org.uk

RCCs have a considerable understanding of rural issues born out of a long involvement with rural communities. They provide a forum for voluntary and community organisations and a wide range of information and advisory services. They enjoy membership of many partnerships that encourage community development and capacity building in rural areas and that manage projects delivering benefits to rural communities. Part of the RCCs' effectiveness stems from the close relationships they have with networks including village hall committees, playing fields trusts and parish councils. Recently they have also developed relationships with regional structures, most notably through the West Midlands Regional Rural Affairs Forum, the West Midlands Rural Network, RAWM (Regional Action West Midlands - the voluntary and community sector network) and the West Midlands European Network.



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Village Halls across the West Midlands, Tim Scott, Community Council of Staffordshire

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Papers available:

Rural Housing
Rural Transport
Voluntary Sector Infrastructure
West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum
Village Halls in the West Midlands
The changing face of support for Rural Communities

Supported by:

