



West Midlands Rural Community Council Network: Modernising Rural Delivery - rural England after the Haskins Report

Background

The publication of the Rural White Paper in November 2000 marked an important stage in the evolution of the Government's policy framework for rural England and saw the introduction of a number of new programmes. From a voluntary and community sector perspective the most significant of these was the package of support delivered by the Countryside Agency under the "Vital Villages" banner.

Following the 2001 general election, the Government set up a department with a remit covering rural England as a whole in the shape of Defra (The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs). Other Government departments would continue to have major responsibilities in rural areas but for the first time there was a department with a specific rural remit much wider than just a focus on agriculture.

Following the creation of Defra it soon became clear to Ministers that the arrangements for delivering the Government's rural policies needed to be reviewed. Lord Haskins was invited to lead this review and his report was published in October 2003.

What did the Haskins Report say?

Lord Haskins' research led to the conclusion that the current arrangements had:

- Poor accountability
- Failed to satisfy regional and local priorities
- Involved too many organisations
- Lacked co-ordination
- Confused customers

The Report contained 33 recommendations but these can be summarised under five main themes:

- To improve accountability by splitting responsibility for policy and delivery functions
- To bring delivery closer to the customer by devolving greater responsibility to regional and local organisations
- To develop a more integrated approach by rationalising agencies with overlapping agendas into a new agency responsible for sustainable land management
- 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 tax payer through a more integrated approach to regulation and through simpler services.

"Looking forward to more effective and streamlined ways of tackling rural social exclusion".

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.

What happened next?

Immediately following the publication of the Haskins Report Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State at Defra, made an initial response in which she accepted the main principles of the report but not all of its recommendations. She accepted the need for a full review of funding schemes, the principle of devolved delivery and the setting up of an integrated land management agency. However, she did not accept the recommendation to abolish the Countryside Agency but rather decided to change it to a smaller body with a policy focus only.

There then followed several months of work which culminated in Margaret Beckett's statement to the House of Commons on 21 July 2004 and the publication of Defra's "Rural Strategy 2004".

In the meantime in January 2004 Defra published its review of the Rural White Paper. This concluded that much had been achieved but that there were five important challenges:

- Clarifying the objectives, achieving greater prioritisation and targeting need
- Delivering properly integrated sustainable development
- Understanding and defining national, regional, sub-regional and local roles better, as well as the linkages between urban and rural areas (and the substantial variations within rural areas)
- Improving governance and delivery arrangements
- Continuing to develop a solid evidence base and evaluation framework.

Rural Strategy 2004 - what does it say?

The Strategy is not just a response to the Haskins Report but a new approach to rural policy and delivery. In her statement to the House of Commons Margaret Beckett highlighted a focus on deprivation, on devolution of decisions and delivery and to ensure that people are able to access help.

The Strategy sets out three priorities for rural policy and there is a chapter on each of these:

- **Economic and Social Regeneration** - supporting enterprise across rural England but targeting greater resources at areas of greatest need
- **Social Justice for All** - tackling rural social exclusion wherever it occurs and providing fair access to services and opportunities for all rural people
- **Enhancing the Value of our Countryside** - protecting the natural environment for this and future generations.

The Strategy's economic objective for rural areas has two components:

- Building on the success of the majority of rural areas and
- Tackling the structural economic weaknesses and accompanying poor social conditions that exist in a minority of rural areas.

In relation to the latter areas £2 million extra is being put into the Business Link network and social enterprise is to be facilitated. Existing Defra funding streams aimed at socio-economic interventions in rural areas will be streamlined into a single Rural Regeneration Funding Programme to be devolved to the Regional Development Agencies.

Government Regional Offices have been brokering local arrangements for a Rural Delivery Framework in conjunction with regional partners. The WMRCCN is involved in planning for the new arrangements with GOWM and in particular has taken the lead in relation to the social justice element.

Government wants to obtain stronger direct feedback from rural customers to Ministers and will use the Regional Rural Affairs Forums as a channel for this.

Policy designed to ensure social justice in rural England has two main strands:

- For the majority of rural England which is fundamentally prosperous to ensure fair access to public services and affordable housing
- To tackle social exclusion wherever it occurs.

Fair access to **public services** is a major challenge and there is a commitment to innovation and then "mainstreaming" of workable solutions. **Transport** is identified as a key issue for improving access to services and thereby underpinning economic and social regeneration. A pressing need for **affordable housing**

that helps sustain mixed and viable rural communities is highlighted.

It is proposed to continue to improve the "rural proofing" of the policies and programmes of government departments and others.

There is very clear recognition that rural social exclusion is dispersed and therefore harder to identify. The voluntary and community sector is identified as being better at targeting socially excluded groups and empowering them to improve their lives and communities. There is an intention to sustain investment in the rural voluntary and community sector to strengthen local capacity.

There is a commitment to build on and improve programmes that have been run by the Countryside Agency and Defra so that work through Government Offices and Rural Community Councils can effectively cover:

- Community capacity building including the role of parish councils
- Multi-service outlets
- Use and state of community buildings
- infrastructure and capacity of the voluntary sector.

The strategy for enhancing the value of our countryside has two elements:

- To take action to protect and enhance the rural and urban environment
- To enhance the value and natural beauty of the countryside for rural communities and for the benefit of society in general.

To meet these twin objectives it is proposed to set up an Integrated Agency comprising of all of English Nature, the access, recreation and landscape elements of the Countryside Agency and those functions of the Rural Development Service focused on improving land





management. The new agency will work closely with the Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency. Pending an Act of Parliament to establish the new agency, the constituent parts came together as a confederation from April 2005.

What are the delivery reforms?

One of Lord Haskins' main conclusions was that funding schemes were too complex and there were too many different ones. Defra is to introduce rationalised funding programmes whereby the current 100 or so rural funding schemes will be reduced to three major funding programmes to cover:

- Rural Regeneration
- Agriculture and Food Industry Regeneration
- Natural Resource Protection.

Lord Haskins recommended that there should be a clearer split between responsibility for policy and delivery. Defra is to assume full responsibility for rural and environmental policy functions. Defra will conduct a number of "pathfinders" (Shropshire in this region) at a sub-regional level to look at innovative

delivery solutions at the most devolved level.

Defra aims to improve mainstreaming of the Government's response to rural socio-economic needs and better targeting of deprivation in lagging rural areas. £21 million previously disbursed by the Countryside Agency will be devolved to the Regional Development Agencies "Single Pot".

Regional Rural Affairs Forums will provide a strong voice into the regional decision making process from the customer perspective.

Voluntary and community sector programmes currently run through the Countryside Agency will be run through Government Offices to better join them up with other VCS programmes.

The Countryside Agency will be refocused as a Commission for Rural Communities providing expert advice to Government and advocacy on behalf of rural people. It will not be distracted by delivery functions.

A new Integrated Agency taking on the work of English Nature, the Rural Development Service and much of the work of the Countryside Agency will be established.

It is intended that these delivery arrangements take place in a sustainable development context and Government Offices will have a key role in achieving this.

A new rural definition

Annex A of the Strategy concerns a new definition of rural areas which has been developed over the last two years. Measures of social and employment structure no longer clearly distinguish rural and urban areas so the new definition is based on settlement patterns. The process is a technical one but it has led to the definition of "sparse" and "less sparse" rural areas each of which is divided into "towns and urban fringe," "villages" and "dispersed".

The headline changes

The main changes can be summarised as follows:

- Policy and delivery responsibilities split
- Countryside Agency funding for socio-economic work transferred to Regional Development Agencies

- Funding for rural voluntary and community sector (including Rural Community Councils) channelled via Government Regional Offices
- New Integrated Land Management Agency to take on roles of English Nature, Rural Development Service of Defra and part of Countryside Agency
- “Commission for Rural Communities” formed as an expert policy advisor to government and an advocate for rural people and communities
- Rural Affairs Forum for England to be abolished but bigger role for Regional Rural Affairs Forums with more direct contact with Ministers
- Regionally determined framework for co-ordinated delivery brokered by Government Regional Offices
- Local authorities to take a lead role in “pathfinder” projects as key deliverers of schemes and services to rural areas
- Radical simplification of 100+ funding schemes into three major funding programmes.

Implications for the voluntary and community sector

“More work and more change but new opportunities”, would be one way of summarising the impact for the rural VCS and Rural Community Councils in particular. It is only five years ago that we adjusted to the changes following the demise of the Rural Development Commission and the splitting of its functions to the Countryside Agency and Regional Action West Midlands. The Rural White Paper did, however, provide a step - change in support for rural communities through “Vital Villages” in particular and so the outcomes of change were largely positive.

RCCs, and thus the communities and organisations which they support, have had the long-standing benefit of central Government funding channelled through the Rural Development Commission and then the Countryside Agency. This support is being continued through Government Regional Offices and we need to work to ensure that this is maintained into the future. Lord Haskins’ report is very positive

about RCCs. In his paragraph 5.49 he says; *“I have been impressed by the value that Rural Community Councils add to delivery processes as advisers and facilitators”* and goes on to say in paragraph 5.50 *“our Vital Villages case study exemplified the kind of role that the Rural Community Councils fulfil. They were central to the delivery of the programme, establishing relationships, organising and co-ordinating delivery and assisting applicants with general help and advice. Their contribution was valued and praised by all customers and stakeholder organisations”*. In his recommendation 14, he says; *“The potential of Rural Community Councils as partners in community based delivery is underestimated and should be enhanced”*. In Rural Strategy 2004 Defra says, (paragraph 64) in relation to social and community programmes that *“We expect Rural Community Councils to play an important part in these future programmes”*. As indicated above (paragraph 12) Defra envisages that work through Government Regional Offices and RCCs will build on and improve programmes that have been run by the Countryside Agency.

To date we have been used to working with bodies (the RDC and the CA) with a





specifically rural remit as major partners. Whilst our links with the Government Regional Office are likely to be mainly on the Defra side for other programmes (notably transport), the relationship will be with Advantage West Midlands. The reactions of the West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum to the Haskins Report proposals on this are most pertinent. The Forum concluded *"If devolution of Defra's social agenda to RDAs was to be successful, their role and remit would need to be widened. Members were concerned that the RDAs' current agenda was economically focused without full regard for social issues.*

The social agenda must be resourced in its own right and not be subservient to the economic agenda. The funding programme must also acknowledge the significant contribution of the voluntary and

community sector. RDAs must be suitably resourced to undertake the widened remit."

Lord Haskins' recommendation 14 (referred to above paragraph 25) envisaged local authorities and local partnerships assuming the main responsibility for delivery of schemes and services to rural communities with RCCs having an enhanced role. This is being taken forward through "pathfinder" projects (Shropshire in this region).

Defra funding is to be channelled via Government Offices to the rural voluntary and community sector, including Rural Community Councils, to strengthen local capacity. It is not clear exactly how this interfaces with the VCS Infrastructure Investment Programme being supported by Defra as part of the Home Office Active Community Directorate's wider

programme. The latter are only funded to March 2006.

The enhanced role envisaged for the Regional Rural Affairs Forums underlines the need for a closer contact between the Forum and the VCS in the West Midlands.

The VCS will need to establish liaison with the new Integrated Land Management Agency since there are community development dimensions to programmes that the Agency will be dealing with. For the first two years, pending legislation, this means with the "confederation of partners".

RCCs, in particular, had a close relationship with the Rural Development Commission before it organised itself on a regional basis. Rural Strategy 2004 indicates that the "Commission for Rural Communities" needs to have links with its "interlocutors" at regional and local level. This will need to include links with VCS.

The document also commits Defra to bringing together the widest possible range of rural stakeholders as a sounding board for Ministers in a major annual rural conference for national, regional and local organisations. VCS organisations at all levels will need to be able to participate in this.

Reactions

Has the Government got it right this time? Given the brief period since the last reorganisation this is an inevitable question to be asked. That reorganisation split the economic from the social functions of the Rural Development Commission, combining the former with the environmental and recreational functions of the Countryside Commission to make the Countryside Agency. The economic function was placed with the newly created Regional Development Agencies. Now the new arrangements appear to put the social partly with the RDAs and partly with Government Regional Offices. Economic matters stay with the RDAs but environment and recreation go to the new Integrated Agency. In addition there are proposals to devolve more to local partnerships led by local authorities which will be explored through "pathfinders". Is this simplification and rationalisation? It is never easy to devise organisational structures for

complex issues so maybe only time will tell.

Will the remit of the Regional Development Agencies be widened appropriately to take on the functions transferred from the Countryside Agency? The West Midlands Regional Rural Affairs Forum has made a strong plea for this (see above paragraph 26). If jobs created and protected remain the principal output drivers there will be problems. Some people have voiced the view that RDAs are too remote and urban focussed. In the West Midlands, however, Advantage West Midlands has produced its "Rural Renaissance" accompanying statement to the Regional Economic Strategy.

Will splitting policy from delivery work? Will Defra receive the feedback on

delivery that it really needs to set the policy framework? The effectiveness of the "Commission for Rural Communities" will be crucial in this respect in giving impartial advice to Government and monitoring and reporting on the delivery of others.

As is often the case, the Strategy says "all the right things" but will it in fact deliver? Often this depends on the availability of funding. Will workable solutions on public services actually get "mainstreamed" or will we have successful pilots which die because funding is short-term? Will transport (seen as a key issue) improvements be sustained and developed? Will affordable housing really be delivered? The Strategy says there are no simple answers to the latter but others

suggest that stopping selling off council housing and making more money available for social housing would be big steps in the right direction. References to the Thames Gateway in the Strategy are not reassuring to people across rural England as a whole.

Environmental organisations have raised questions about the record of Regional Development Agencies in giving adequate recognition to the value of landscape.

Feedback from consultation events held by RCCs

Consultation events for voluntary and community sector organisations and parish councils were held across the region. Whilst not all issues were raised at all events there was a strong pattern of agreement across the region. The main themes are set out below:

- **Definition of the meaning of Social Justice and Fairness** in a rural context is a key issue.
Rural areas vary considerably with a wide range of population density and settlement patterns requiring different solutions in different areas.
Needs of people in rural areas are wide ranging with particular issues relating to poverty, inclusion and equality. Emphasis on problems for young people, older people (increasing proportion of the population) and people with disabilities.
There is a need for a better evidence base particularly relating to small area statistics – social exclusion at very local levels is lost in aggregate statistics.
There needs to be greater recognition at regional and national levels of the reality of rural social exclusion.
- **Fair access** to services implies that there should be a minimum standard of service provision.
If access is to be fair compared to urban areas then there is a need for appropriate and innovative solutions but also adequate funding.
A regional rural services standard is desirable.
A wide range of services should have decentralised delivery using multi-use access points such as village halls, schools, post offices etc.





Communication between rural service providers is vital.

Information about availability of services must be first class and access to them must be simple.

Adequate, accessible transport services are a crucial part of reducing social exclusion. Innovative solutions tailored to needs are required.

Access to some services is affected by problems in availability of staff especially in remoter areas.

- **Balanced communities** is a concept that requires clear support (avoiding villages largely occupied by pensioners and commuters).
- **Affordable housing** and its provision is absolutely crucial to this. Houses for rent not subject to the right to buy are an essential element in this. Innovative and creative approaches are needed. Lack of a sufficient range of job opportunities particularly jobs to attract back well qualified young people.
- **Parish Councils** should be more proactive rather than reactive. Parish Councils have an enabling role but there is a need for more devolved

power and true local representation in decision making.

- **Parish Plans** are most important as vehicles for communicating local needs and feeding into strategies and as a springboard for action.
- **Capacity building** both within local communities and the voluntary and community sector is crucial. There are difficulties in accessing advice and assistance and there is inadequate locally accessible infrastructure to support communities. Resources need to be available to VCS to engage with requirements of Rural Strategy. There are particular difficulties in engaging with marginalised communities in a rural setting. Physical infrastructure such as village halls need to be of appropriate quality.
- **Funding** issues are of crucial importance. Funding needs to be maintained over longer periods and many funding schemes have too short a life. There is a lack of knowledge of the community development approach in

the management of some funding programmes.

There is insufficient acceptance of innovative solutions (risk taking) in some funding mechanisms.

Rural Development Agency remit is too narrowly focussed on economic matters.

BME funding criteria disenfranchise rural organisations.

- **Administrative processes** need to be simpler but also to reflect an understanding attitude and appreciation of the micro rather than macro scale. Local rural communities need to be able to have greater influence on regional bodies. Greater diversity is needed on decision-making bodies. Must be effective feedback loop from service deliverers to policy makers. Too many complex regulations can stifle local enterprise. Need for better communication and more closely shared agenda between different agencies.

Needs to be recognition of the crucial role of volunteers in many initiatives and limitations on capacity and motivation.

- **Crime** (including drug and alcohol abuse) is a key issue not given adequate attention in "Rural Strategy 2004".
- There is a need for joined up thinking across **borders** both local authority and England/Wales. Many residents on the periphery use services in other counties.
- **Cultural issues** particularly related to demographic change, incomer/indigenous population and social divisions need to be properly recognised.

Wider range of people need to be involved – a move away from the "ruling elite".

Parish councils need to be more accessible especially to young people.

- **Sustainable Development** needs to give equal attention to social, environmental and economic aspects in practice as well as in theory. Important to encourage more people to work from home and locally.

What Next?

Much work has been done by regional partners during recent months to prepare a Regional Rural Delivery Framework. Draft priorities emerging from this are:

- Environment
- Access to services
- Citizenship and communities
- Dynamic business base
- Learning and skills
- Regional infrastructure for the 21st century.

A consultation paper on these is to be produced and sub-regional workshops will be held.



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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:



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.

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.