

**'The countryside at a crossroads:  
Is the Natural Environment and Rural Communities  
Act 2006 still fit for purpose?'**

**House of Lords**

**Debate on a Report from the Select Committee on the Natural Environment and  
Rural Communities Act 2006 (Lord Cameron of Dillington, Crossbench)**

**Monday 2 July 2018**

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**Introduction**

The Countryside Alliance welcomes this important debate on the report from the Select Committee on the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006. The Report shone a light on our countryside and how it is treated under the current system of government.

Those who live and work in the countryside can be forgiven for feeling that the countryside is often treated as a theme park, not receiving the political support and action it needs and deserves. Rural life holds specific challenges, which means it needs different solutions and policies to our urban neighbours and this is something we urged all parties at the recent General Election to recognise.

It is clear that Brexit will be front and centre of the work of this Parliament, and the decision to leave the EU will have a profound impact on the countryside. However, issues such as the lack of affordable housing or the roll-out of broadband in the countryside continue to be substantial challenges facing this Government.

When the Alliance gave evidence to the House of Lords Committee we highlighted a number of issues that the Report picks up on, including the proposal for rural proofing to be led by the Cabinet Office, the loss of granular research on rural issues and the need for rural affairs to be fully integrated into all government departments.

The Report's recommendation that responsibility for rural policy should be transferred from Defra to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government could be a first step towards the countryside to be taken seriously. Unless there is a sea change in government and the civil service, coupled with a greater understanding of the countryside, nothing will change.

In our evidence we also made the case for rural proofing and argued that we need to ensure it is effective and fair. Rural proofing must be integrated into the psyche of Whitehall and beyond if it is going to work, which is why we called for it to be led from the Cabinet Office and are pleased that the Committee adopted our suggestion.

## **Background**

NERC established new bodies concerned with the natural environment (Natural England) and rural communities (Commission for Rural Communities). It made provision in connection with wildlife, sites of special scientific interest, National Parks and the Broads; amended the law relating to rights of way; made provision as to the Inland Waterways Amenity Advisory Council; provided for flexible administrative arrangements in connection with functions relating to the environment and rural affairs and certain other functions.

From the Countryside Alliance perspective NERC worked against integrating rural policy by separating the environment from social aspects of policy – the countryside is intrinsically integrated and so should policy development and delivery.

## **Chapter 5 – Rural Communities**

### **Commission for Rural Communities (CRC)**

The Countryside Alliance initially welcomed the CRC as the aims were laudable and it gave rural communities an independent voice. We did, however, raise concerns about the lack of commitment to work with local communities and the fact that rural proofing should have been more overtly stated on the face of the legislation.

However, the CRC fundamentally failed to live up to those expectations:

- It did not have sufficient powers to hold the Government to account – it was more lapdog than watchdog;
- It was used by the Government to appease the countryside at a time of tension between the Government and rural communities rather than being a genuine rural champion;
- CRC lacked delivery powers and money; and
- CRC should have been more dynamic in its delivery, spoken the truth to government and ensured that Government policy was rural proofed across Whitehall.

The CRC did become an authority in terms of providing a rural evidence base. The annual State of the Countryside Report published by the CRC was seen as an authoritative source of information, alongside the other reports they published ranging from broadband to the uplands. Since its abolition there has been a loss of research facility which has had an impact on the knowledge base and Defra has failed to fill that gap. Defra do produce a statistical digest but it is not as comprehensive as the State of the Countryside Report, nor does it provide a policy insight on delivery, pulling the strands of rural life together or sharing best practice.

In our evidence we called for the integration of all aspects of rural life into policy development – i.e. bringing together social, economic, environmental, and food and farming because since 2013, when the CRC was abolished, there has been a distinct lack of emphasis on social and economic issues which has not been adequately picked up by Defra. For example, Defra is developing a 25 year plan for environment, food and farming, but there is nothing on the social and economic issues facing rural communities, and the only two big reports into rural areas were initiated by No 10 and the Treasury – Rural Economic Growth Programme and Rural Productivity Plan – not Defra.

This lack of inclusion of social and economic issues is not helpful, particularly as the country prepares to leave the European Union. It is important that the structure and governance of all Whitehall departments treats the countryside as a whole and does not compartmentalise farming or tourism or other industries away from the land and communities. The countryside must be viewed as a whole.

## Rural Proofing

One size fits all policy does not work, which is why rural proofing is important and rural policy itself is often much more complicated than in urban areas. Rural areas are home to one-fifth of England's population and a quarter of all registered businesses; contributing over 16 per cent of England's economy each year. However, rural areas face particular challenges around distance, sparsity and demography. That is why government policies must take these into account at all stages of policy development and delivery.

One of the roles of the CRC was to ensure rural proofing. However, in practice how rural proofing was implemented throughout Whitehall was patchy and inconsistent and no one was held to account for lack of implementation.

Lord Cameron (Committee Chair) was asked by Defra to undertake a review of the process to ensure that rural issues were mainstreamed into policy making and decision taking. The Report, published in 2015, was universally welcomed and provided a framework to move rural proofing into the mainstream policy agenda. Most importantly, however, the changes proposed were light touch and entirely achievable with little or minimal disruption to parliamentary business. The Government was urged to implement all the recommendations.

Off the back of Lord Cameron's report Defra produced guidance (2017) for government departments on how to rural proof, which was also welcome. However, unless that document is integrated into the psyche of Whitehall and beyond it is fundamentally not going to work.

The Countryside Alliance believes we need to make rural proofing work effectively and fairly. How else do we ensure we are avoiding unintended consequences before they happen so that decisions are taken that provide the flexibility to be successfully implemented in differing geographic, social and economic settings? We also need to ensure the current lack of integration of policy across government departments and between central and local government is tackled. We recommended that rural proofing must be led from the heart of government and were pleased the Report adopted our suggestion.

## Conclusion

The House of Lords Select Committee on the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act reports that the Government is failing rural communities and the responsibility for rural policy should be transferred from Defra to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Wherever the responsibility for rural communities sits, it is essential that at a time when we are leaving the European Union we have a strong and independent Rural Ambassador with an annual debate on the floor of the house looking at the Government's rural proofing performance.

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