



Power to the people: rural watchdog calls for revolution in local decision-making

A major report launched today (Thursday 31 January) by the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) highlights that nearly half of rural residents feel unable to influence local decisions directly affecting their lives. The report also says just a quarter would bother to make contact with their local councillor to seek redress. In contrast, nearly 70% of local councillors believe they are doing a good job. Today's report is the outcome of a national inquiry started in February 2007 into how the role of local councillors can be strengthened.

Commenting on the findings, Dr. Stuart Burgess Chair of the CRC and the government's Rural Advocate said: "As chairman of the inquiry panel I had the unique opportunity to hear first-hand the views of rural people and their elected representatives. We support the government's drive to invest in creating strong and dynamic local leaders, but the fact has to be faced that according to our inquiry, councillors and rural people are simply not connecting. And people who do try to connect are confused about how they should engage with their local councillor.

Dr. Burgess continued: "If acted upon the recommendations set out in our report will see citizens more fully engaged in local decision-making, enhance the democratic role for rural communities and create a stronger, more effective voice for local councillors. We are now looking forward to the involvement of stakeholders nationally, regionally and locally in helping take forward our findings. We also hope our report will add further momentum to the work of the Councillors' Commission led by Dame Jane Roberts, particularly in relation to those local councillors representing more rural communities."

The key recommendations in the report are:

- central government extending greater trust to both local government parish and town councils (including the new unitary authorities and quality parish councils);
- government should begin to end its council tax capping regime for rural local government (see note 4);
- local government should be supported and encouraged to create neighbourhood budgets and involve local people in spending decisions;
- giving greater powers to Local Strategic Partnerships (for example by providing more flexible means to draw down funds from Regional Development Agencies);
- central government should meet the costs of local elections in all tiers;
- strong push toward more elections in parish councils rather than co-options;
- the creation of powerful new unitary authorities;
- a requirement on all councillors to provide an annual report to their constituents;
- Local Strategic Partnerships and their Local Area Agreements, supported by central and local government, should clearly commit to supporting parish and market town plans; and
- local government should work with others to put in place ward and parish liaison officers.

The CRC wants to work with Communities and Local Government in taking these recommendations forward. We want the Local Government Association, National Association of Local Councils and others to continue working with us on this. Immediate opportunities include the government's response to the Councillors' Commissions and the Constitutional Renewal Draft Bill. This is designed to enhance the role of local councillors and devolve more power and resources to a local level.

ENDS

For further information contact Nick Milton on 07900 608349

Notes for editors:

1. The report 'Participation inquiry: strengthening the role of local councillors', CRC 55, January 2008 can be found (from 31 January) at www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/publications
2. The Councillors' Commission report can be found at www.communities.gov.uk:81/councillorscommission/publications/representingthefuture/
3. The Constitutional Renewal Draft Bill was announced in the Queen's Speech of 6 November 2007
www.number10.gov.uk/files/pdf/26.Constitutional%20Renewal%20Draft%20Bill.pdf
4. CRC is calling on government to end its council tax capping regime for high performing and small budget local authorities (such as shire district councils), and for authorities using participatory budgeting and referenda based approaches to the level of their council tax. This should be the first step on a path of ending council tax capping altogether – the local authorities' incentive to achieving this goal being enhanced local accountability.
5. Information about the Commission for Rural Communities and our work can be found on our website: www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

Our Annual Review provides an overview of our activities during the last year
www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/publications/annualreview20062007