



Commission for
Rural Communities
Tackling rural disadvantage

**Participation
inquiry:
strengthening
the role of local
councillors**

Executive Summary



Who we are and what we do

The Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) was established in April 2005 and became an independent body on 1 October 2006, following the enactment of the Natural England and Rural Communities Act, 2006. The role of the Commission is to provide well-informed, independent advice to government and ensure that policies reflect the real needs and circumstances of people living and working in rural England. We give particular focus to tackling disadvantage and economic under-performance.

It has three key functions:

- Rural advocate: the voice for rural people, business and communities;
- Expert adviser: providing evidence-based, objective advice to government and others; and
- Independent watchdog: monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

Introduction

Rural areas are home to 20 per cent of the English population – that is nine-and-a-half million people. Rural England, with three tiers of local government, has more than its fair share of local councillors. There are about 20,000 principal authority councillors in shire England and then another 70,000-plus parish and town councillors in England.

The government has initiated an ambitious array of policies to deliver its local devolution commitments. Ministers are moving ahead with moves towards unitary authorities in several shire areas, which we know has often been locally controversial. Hazel Blears, the Communities and Local Government (CLG) secretary, is also keenly promoting new, more participative approaches to local democracy, such as participatory budgeting and public petitions.

The government is also extending the 'power of wellbeing' to the parish and town council sector for the first time and allowing the creation of parish councils in London, where there is appetite for this, also for the first time. The ongoing sub-national review, including the end of regional assemblies and the transfer of regional planning responsibilities to regional development agencies, is also a complex part of a complex mix.

We know that many rural communities struggle to make their voices heard locally (let alone regionally and nationally). We know that many rural people don't use their local councillors, or even know who they are. We know that confusion exists in rural areas about which tier of government is responsible for what. We also knew that Dame Jane Roberts and her Councillors' Commission had been commissioned by CLG to review the role of councillors, and part of our inquiry was designed to help feed into her report.



The participation inquiry

In February 2007 the CRC began a national inquiry into the role of rural councillors. Our inquiry explored the opportunities and challenges for rural councillors in bringing decision-making closer to their communities. Our aim was to help rural communities have greater influence over local decisions, by supporting local councillors to become better democratic champions acting on behalf of their communities.

The inquiry was led by Dr. Stuart Burgess, the CRC's chair and the government's rural advocate, and supported by four of our commissioners: Alison McLean, Professor Mark Shucksmith, Professor Michael Winter and Richard Burge.

The inquiry sought to examine the barriers and challenges that:

- stop rural communities having greater influence over local decisions; and
- stop rural councillors from being stronger champions on behalf of rural communities.

We collected evidence from local authorities and local councillors at all levels. We held over 35 hearings with business groups, local authority officers, local councillors, voluntary and community groups, formal partnerships and campaigning organisations. We undertook public opinion research and a thorough literature review.

Our inquiry found that there is much that is right and healthy in our local democracy in rural England. We found many examples of strong local leadership, proactive town and parish councils and effective community voices. We found much that is right and healthy in rural local democracy. But our work also confirmed that all was not well with rural local government and that there were many different views about what should be done.



The inquiry recommendations

Our inquiry panel agreed 10 recommendations, which we have presented to CLG and will be following up at official and ministerial level.

1. **We recommend greater ‘double devolution’**, the extension of more trust from central to local level and from local to neighbourhood level. We want to see a commitment to a statutory, constitutional application of subsidiarity. As part of this agenda, we think it is time government started to end its council tax-capping powers, in the first instance, for high-performing and small-budget rural local authorities.
2. We encourage all principal local authorities, building on existing good practice, to **allocate neighbourhood budgets to local councillors** for expenditure within their divisions and wards. We also encourage parish and town councils to involve their local residents more directly in spending decisions. We recommend that these approaches should be managed through participatory budgeting principles, allowing local people a direct say in how some of their tax resources are spent within their neighbourhoods.
3. **Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) should be given greater powers** to draw down funding support from public agencies to deliver their local area agreements (i.e. to deliver the objectives of their Sustainable Community Strategies). To be really effective, LSPs must be able to access resources from a wide range of agencies including, for example, regional development agencies, the Environment Agency, Natural England and the Highways Agency, to deliver locally agreed targets and priorities.
4. **The costs of democracy should be met by taxpayers nationally.** Currently, the parish tier has to meet its own election costs, unlike any other tier of local democracy. This is a disproportionate burden that should be lifted. Properly managed, the marginal costs to the national taxpayer are slight.
5. All possible efforts should be made to **support parish councils to become fully elected representative bodies.** We wish to create an environment where co-option becomes unnecessary as a substitute for elected parish councillors. To help this happen, we recommend that all local elections should be held on the same day, and that incentives are offered to combat voter apathy.
6. **We want to see a structure of powerful new unitary authorities** serving their communities, working closely with a renewed structure of empowered and influential parish and town councils. We believe that unitary authorities will strengthen and clarify local democracy and local accountability. They should help shire local government ‘punch its weight’ with city regions and regional bodies. We also continue to have uncertainties over the sustainability of the remaining two-tier structure.
7. We want councillors to communicate more effectively with their constituents. In particular, there should be an expectation that **all ward councillors and all parish councils provide an annual report** to their constituents.

8. **Both central and local government should commit to supporting very local community plans**, such as parish plans and market town plans. For example, we want to see these community plans being reflected within the statutory local authority-wide sustainable community strategies. LSPs and their local area agreements should also reflect the content and ambitions of community plans. This could even include the development of neighbourhood area agreements, managed by neighbourhood partnerships (including relevant local authorities) at the parish or town level.
9. **We want all local authorities to provide ward and parish liaison officers** to advise, inform and support councillors of all tiers in their work on behalf of their constituents, and also to help advise and support the work of parish council clerks.
10. **We support the idea of a 'community call for action'**. We want to see proposed reforms around petitioning taken forward strongly.

Conclusion

Our findings and recommendations represent more than just a list. They suggest a broader change of direction is needed, towards greater trust and decentralisation to local government (including parish and town councils) and to the councillors that represent rural people and communities.

All these recommendations have tried to keep a focus on the particular rural challenges facing the devolution reform agenda. We believe that too often, these rural aspects get overlooked by government and others.

There are some 'uncomfortable' messages for local authorities. During our inquiry we have found faults with local democracy and with local authorities. Too many people feel absolutely no connection with their local authorities and their local councillors. This is not good enough. We think that rural people deserve better local democracy and better local government. For example, we think there should be an expectation and responsibility on councillors, at all levels, to communicate with their electorates and to be accountable to them for their work. It should be for local authorities to support them in that activity. They should be expected to be proactive (and to be fair many currently are) on behalf of their communities.

We are looking forward to working with central and local government to progress our recommendations. In particular, we look forward to continuing our work with the Councillors' Commission when it reconvenes at the end of this year to review progress and next steps on improving the role of locally-elected councillors.

CRC's full report '[Participation inquiry: strengthening the role of local councillors](#)', CRC 55, January 2008 can be found at www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/publications



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