



CRC 1/07

6 February 2007

Can rural councillors make a difference?

The Local Government Bill currently going through Parliament proposes a stronger role for local councillors. But while 88%¹ of councillors feel they are effective or very effective in their role, recent research by the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) has revealed that nearly half² of rural people do not believe that they can influence decisions, and only a quarter³ of rural people would channel their views through their local councillor.

The Commission for Rural Communities has therefore, today, launched a national inquiry to explore the opportunities and challenges for rural councillors and what stands in the way of them doing more to help rural people have greater influence over local decisions.

Speaking about the inquiry, Stuart Burgess, Chair of the CRC and Rural Advocate said:

“We know that rural councillors play a hugely important role on behalf of rural communities. But we also know that many rural people do not feel involved in local decision making, even though they would like their views to be heard.

The Commission for Rural Communities is therefore seeking views about how to strengthen the role of local councillors in rural areas. We want to hear people's views, experiences and ideas about what works, what needs changing and what the role of councillors should be in the future.”

The Commission has set out six areas where it is seeking information. These include:

- Examples where rural councillors are helping their community influence local decisions
- The barriers and constraints that stand in the way of rural councillors doing more
- Why people sometimes chose other routes, such as local charities or community groups, to influence local decisions
- What the role of councillors should be in the future and what is needed to unlock that potential.

Stuart Burgess added, “We're keen to hear from rural councillors and parish clerks, community groups, local partnerships, council officials, business associations and anyone with ideas and experience they want to share. We will be exploring the issues people raise with us in a series of visits over the spring, and all the information will be used to shape the inquiry's final recommendations for action.”

Details of how people can get involved in the inquiry, with a full set of the inquiry's questions, are on the Commission's website www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk. The deadline for sending in views is Friday 18 May.

ENDS

For further information please contact Nick McClelland, Commission for Rural Communities, on 020 7932 5814 or 07900 608 045.

Notes to editors

1. The Call for Evidence is available to view at www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk and responses are welcome by email, FREEPOST or fax.

2. Statistics are taken from:

- 1) National Census of Local Authority Councillors in England 2004, Employers Organisation and IDeA, 2005
- 2) Across England, 46% of rural people do not believe that they can influence decisions. Rural residents in the North East are least likely to think they can influence decisions (59%), while rural residents in the Yorkshire and Humber region are most likely to think they can influence decisions (39%). Rural Insights Survey CRC, IPSOS MORI, 2006.
- 3) User satisfaction and local government service provision: a national survey DCLG, 2006

3. The Commission for Rural Communities was established initially as an operating division of the Countryside Agency in April 2005, and became an independent body on 1 October 2006, following the enactment of the NERC (The Natural Environment and Rural Communities) Act 2006. Our role is to provide well-informed, independent advice to government and ensure that policies reflect the real needs of people living and working in rural England, with a particular focus on tackling disadvantage.

We have three key functions:

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

Further information about the Commission for Rural Communities and its work can be found at www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk