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Threat to rural life as more young quit the countryside

The Government will be told today (Thursday 4 March) that the long-term future of the countryside is in jeopardy because so many young people are being forced out of rural areas to find homes, jobs and support.

The alert comes from Dr Stuart Burgess – the Government's Rural Advocate – based on evidence he has gathered from communities in all parts of rural England about the fears, aspirations, challenges and needs of young rural England.

In a report being delivered directly to the Prime Minister, Dr Burgess says: "Wherever I go, I hear deep concerns – that challenges with housing, work, transport, training and social exclusion are preventing young people from living in the countryside. Without young people to provide a work force, rural economies are unable to fulfil their full potential and rural communities can go into a decline.

"On top of this, lack of broadband and mobile phone coverage in many rural areas is hitting young people and businesses alike – be it through recruitment and employment, better access to learning and support services or enjoying the connectivity that has become an everyday feature of urban youth culture, such as joining a social network or getting internet help with homework."

At the same time, the Commission for Rural Communities, which Dr Burgess chairs, will publish a 'State of the countryside' update, setting out the statistical facts of rural life for children and young people, including the current rate of outward migration.

Dr Burgess points out: "My clear message is that challenges for rural young people need addressing positively and urgently and that failure to act will put the future viability of our rural communities at risk. It is essential to break the cycle of low aspirations and, instead, inspire young people to fulfil their potential and play an active role in our society. My personal commitment is to seek ways of increasing the engagement of rural young people with these issues which so clearly affect their futures and find ways of harnessing their enthusiasm and creativity to find imaginative new solutions which will benefit us all."

As well as calling on policymakers to demonstrate a better understanding of the challenges facing rural young people, Dr Burgess's report puts forward practical solutions, including:

- flexible planning to create more affordable rural housing;
- new ways to meet employment and training needs in more isolated areas;
- greater efforts by schools and universities to raise young people's aspirations;
- a renewed focus on providing integrated public transport; and
- a push to improve mobile phone coverage and broadband services in rural areas.

The full text of the 'Rural Advocate report 2010' can be found at:

www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/CRC118-rural-advocate-report.pdf

To download 'State of the Countryside Update: children and educational services' visit:

www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/Web43sotcupdate.pdf

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Key issues and recommendations

Challenge: **Housing** The lack of affordable housing – to buy or to rent – is cited as the major factor forcing young people out of rural areas, or discouraging their return. Statistically, social housing accounts for only 13% of the housing stock in rural areas, compared with 22% in urban places. For council housing the figures are even lower (4%). By contrast, analysis shows that between 2006 and 2031 the demand for new rural housing will grow by 35% (compared with 27% projected urban growth). **Recommend** Local authorities should review their housing land assessments to take better account of rural needs and adopt a more creative and flexible approach to planning.

Challenge: **Employment and skills** The economic downturn is reinforcing traditional barriers to rural employment, such as inadequate public transport and few training and guidance opportunities. For example, only 80 of England's 573 Job Centre Plus outlets are in market towns and only 23 in rural areas. Yet in June 2009, 40% of rural 16-24-year-olds were unemployed (107,000) or economically inactive (267,000). **Recommend** New ways must be found to extend the support offered by Job Centre Plus, Connexions, similar schemes and apprenticeships to young people in villages and hamlets.

Challenge: **Transport** Inadequate public transport makes rural young people more dependent on private travel than their urban counterparts, inhibits independence, limits job, training and leisure choices and increases isolation. An example is that 22% of urban children can reach where they want to be on foot but this drops to 7% for children in rural areas. **Recommend** When local authorities review their local transport plans this year, they should set out explicitly how they will meet the needs of rural communities.

Challenge: **Communications** Digital technology offers major hope for rural people and businesses – creating a new way to access services, socialise and take advantage of e-enterprise. But while 60% of urban areas can receive cable-based broadband, the figure slumps to 1.5% for villages and hamlets; and many rural areas suffer patchy mobile phone coverage. For rural young people, exclusion is a double blow. First, schools and colleges to expect students to get Internet help with homework. Second, they are excluded from text messaging and online networking that plays such a big part in youth culture today. **Recommend** The Government's delivery of Next Generation Access by 2017 must put rural areas with the greatest need at the forefront of targeted delivery, and equal attention should be paid to improving mobile phone coverage.

Notes for editors:

1 The role of the **Rural Advocate** is to put the case for rural people to the highest levels of government – linking village halls with Whitehall. The role is an independent, non-political appointment made by the Prime Minister, and one that gives direct access to government Ministers and departments.

2 **Dr Stuart Burgess**, CBE, was appointed Rural Advocate in 2004 and combines it with chairing the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC). Dr Burgess is also a member of the ethics committee for the Department for Work and Pensions, chair of the inter-faith group for the Metropolitan Police's safer neighbourhoods scheme and a member of the University Court of Nottingham. Prior to the establishment of the CRC, Dr Burgess chaired Countryside Agency. He has served as a regional, national and international leader in the Methodist Church and was President of the Methodist Church of Great Britain in the millennium year. Since his last Rural Advocate Report to the Prime Minister, Stuart Burgess has undertaken a wide range of visits to rural communities focussing on many different subjects – details of which can be found on the Rural Advocate pages of the CRC website: www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

3 The **Commission for Rural Communities** acts as the advocate for England's rural communities, as an expert adviser to government, and as a watchdog to ensure that government actions, policies and programmes recognise and respond effectively to rural needs, with a particular focus on disadvantage.

It has 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, reporting on and seeking to mainstream rural into the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk