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Rural Advocate reports to Prime Minister on realities of rural England

The Government's Rural Advocate, Dr. Stuart Burgess, today launched his second report to the Prime Minister, setting out the aspirations, experiences and concerns of people living and working in rural England. During 2007 Dr. Burgess visited rural communities up and down the country to listen to rural people about what matters most – the many benefits of rural living but also some real concerns.

Speaking about his report Dr. Burgess said “Rural life can offer great advantages and I have seen many examples of real community spirit and creative solutions to problems. But I have also witnessed people in real hardship and struggling to get by. There are over 928,000 rural households living below the official government poverty threshold of £16,492 household income per annum. But because rural disadvantage is scattered it is hidden through the averaging of official statistics and a perception of the countryside as affluent and idyllic. I urge government to develop policies that better reflect the nature of rural disadvantage, targeting people in need, rather than places.

“The lack of affordable homes to rent and to buy continues to be the single biggest issue highlighted to me on my visits. I heard about growing numbers of people not qualifying for social housing, but not earning enough to afford to buy a house either. I have also witnessed the willingness of communities to come together to tackle the problem and explore potential solutions such as community land trusts to meet local housing needs. Affordable homes underpin the future sustainability of rural communities, and whilst I welcome the attention to tackling the problem in the Housing Green Paper, rural housing targets need to be reflected in regional strategies.

“The countryside is also facing significant demographic change, causing rural communities genuine concern about their future viability. There are now nearly 400,000 fewer young people aged 15-29 in rural areas than there were 20 years ago, and at the other end of the spectrum the average age of rural people is getting three months older every year.

“The loss of key services and their contribution to the vitality and sense of community within rural areas has been another recurring theme. Government policies need to better reflect the social benefits that local services contribute, and the increased cost of providing services in rural areas. However, I have been especially impressed with the many creative examples of communities getting together and providing services which are under threat such as post offices being provided in pubs and community halls, as well as village shops.

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"I have also drawn attention to the severe difficulties faced by the farming community in the wake of unprecedented levels of flooding and incidents of animal disease last year. I remain hugely impressed by the energy, industry and determination of the farmers I have met. I believe the future for our hill farming communities merits particular attention and therefore call for government to consider establishing a commission on the future of hill farming, to determine how such areas can be managed in the future. I would also urge government to lead a debate towards a new vision for use of the land as a precious and limited commodity and the role of farming within this."

In his report Dr. Burgess sets out a wide-ranging package of actions where leadership from government is required to tackle the issues people raised with him to ensure that rural areas continue to thrive. His recommendations range from calling for a standing recovery fund to help businesses continue trading after future environmental 'shocks', to encouraging rural communities to taking a lead on climate change and enhanced powers for parish councils.

ENDS

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Notes for editors:

1. The 'Report of the Rural Advocate 2007, CRC 58, February 2008 can be found at: www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/publications/ruraladvocatereport2007
2. Dr. Stuart Burgess is the Rural Advocate for England; he combines this with his role as Chairman of the Commission for Rural Communities. As Rural Advocate he puts the case for rural communities at the highest levels in government making the link between people and government policy.

The purpose of his regular visits to rural communities is to listen directly to people's views and experiences about the issues that affect their lives and futures. By meeting individuals, Dr. Burgess can inform government about the reality of the diverse and changing needs of rural communities, businesses and individuals.

3. 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