



13 December 2005

CRC 5/05

## BEST FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES?

Rural proofing is having a positive impact in some policy areas, according to the Commission for Rural Communities' latest rural proofing report 2004/2005, but overall the report gives a mixed picture and there are concerns about the extent to which the real needs and circumstances of rural people's lives have been fully recognised by all government departments.

The annual rural proofing report provides an independent assessment of the extent to which government is delivering its commitment to ensure that rural needs and circumstances are explicitly considered in all policy development and delivery. The report summarises work to deliver this commitment in 2004/05 and highlights where further progress is still required.

In a number of cases, most notably in the roles of the Cabinet Office and Treasury, rural proofing is now part of government processes. Whilst this is a welcome foundation, the reports makes it clear that the success of rural proofing will depend on the impact that it has on the lives of rural people and communities, not just in terms of policy processes. The Commission highlights the fact that rural proofing still needs to have a greater impact on the allocation of government funds, in particular to support delivery in rural areas. For example, there is a strong case for increased funding for rural local authorities to take better account of the specific costs and difficulties of service delivery in rural areas.

The report also monitors progress on delivery of the rural services standard; the 'contract' that the government has put in place with rural people, setting out what they can expect to receive from a range of public services. It shows that targets have been met in the delivery of a number of key areas, such as postal services, emergency services response times and public transport. But in other areas, for example schools with broadband connectivity and levels of healthcare choice, some departments are still not able to provide adequate data on delivery in rural areas.

**Dr Stuart Burgess, the Rural Advocate and Chairman of the Countryside Agency, said,**  
“The needs of rural communities are no different from the rest of society, but the small scale and scattered nature of rural communities, can make service delivery a real, and sometimes more expensive challenge, requiring creative solutions to meet those needs.

“We are pleased at the progress made on rural proofing so far. But our latest report shows that there is still a real need for further significant steps forward, not least in terms of addressing the core issue of resource allocation. We have recently submitted evidence to the ODPM's review of the funding formula for local authorities and we have made a case for increased funding for rural councils. The current formula does not take sufficient account of the extra cost of providing services in rural areas, due to the lack of economies of scale and the extra time and distance inherent in delivering services to rural people.

“Looking forward, both rural proofing and the rural services standard need to address the challenge of increased localisation of policy delivery otherwise there is a risk that increased devolution of delivery and target setting to regional and local levels may dilute national rural commitments. Both processes also need to develop much stronger means by which the experiences and concerns of rural people can inform the outcomes. This will be at the heart of the work of the Commission for Rural Communities and my role as Rural Advocate.”

**-Ends -**

**For further information/interviews please contact:**

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# NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. Full copies of the Rural Proofing report 2004/2005 can be accessed at [www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk)

2. Rural Proofing is a commitment by Government to ensure that all its domestic policies take account of rural circumstances and needs. It is a mandatory part of the policy process, which means that, as policies are developed, policy makers should systematically:

- Consider whether their policy is likely to have a different impact in rural areas, because of particular rural circumstances or needs;
- Make proper assessment of those impacts, if these are likely to be significant;
- Adjust the policy, where appropriate, with solutions to meet rural needs and circumstances.

Rural Proofing applies to all policies, programmes and initiatives and it applies to both design and delivery stages. This report brings together an assessment of Rural Proofing delivery during 2004/05 and progress of the Rural Services Standard over the same period.

3. Following publication of Defra's Rural Strategy in July 2004, the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill, currently under consideration in Parliament, will establish the Commission for Rural Communities as an independent statutory body. Pending legislation, the Commission is operating as a distinct division of the Countryside Agency (from 1 April 2005), providing robust advice to Government and others to ensure that policies reflect the real needs of people living and working in rural England, with a particular focus on tackling disadvantage. The Commission has three main roles:

**Rural advocate:** the voice for rural people, businesses and communities.

**Expert adviser:** providing evidence-based, independent advice to government and others.

**Independent watchdog:** monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

See also the website: [www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk)