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What future for rural communities? State of the Countryside report

The 2005 State of the Countryside Report, published today by the Commission for Rural Communities, provides a comprehensive picture of the quality of life in rural England. It shows that, in the most disadvantaged rural areas, almost one in three households lives on a low income and, across rural England as a whole, the price of housing is out of reach of many local people and some services, such as banking, continue to decline.

Launching the report, Dr Stuart Burgess, Chairman and the Government's Rural Advocate, said: "This report confirms the challenges the Commission faces in taking up our new role on behalf of the 9.5 million people who live in rural England, particularly those suffering economic and social disadvantage."

"The report shows that most people in rural areas enjoy a good quality of life and average household income is higher than in urban areas. But this generally rosy picture conceals large disparities and masks critical underlying issues. Local wages in rural areas can be low and the cost of living high. Even in the more affluent areas, there are people suffering real disadvantage. But, because they are difficult to pinpoint, their problems may be overlooked. The report highlights, yet again, the continuing problem of access to affordable housing for those on lower incomes. In many parts of rural England, particularly the smallest settlements, the gap between house prices and incomes poses significant questions about the future for those communities. If these are not addressed now, there is a very real likelihood that some rural communities will change irrevocably. Then, who will take on local jobs? Who, in future, will be providing and using local services? And what will happen to the strong community spirit we associate with rural communities?"

"This is not just a matter for government. It affects us all and we all need to take action to tackle these issues, including rural communities themselves. As I travel around the country, I shall be asking rural people about the solutions they would like to see and ensuring that government, at all levels, takes account of their views. In particular, I look forward to working with the Government's proposed Affordable Rural Housing Commission and making sure that it builds on the considerable expertise we have developed in this area and giving voice to all rural people."

"The Commission for Rural Communities' first priority is a major piece of work to ensure that the scale and nature of rural disadvantage is better understood and to take a fresh look at policy solutions. We will report to Government early in 2006 and, in the autumn, we shall report on how individual government departments and agencies are responding to the challenge of rural proofing policy and delivery."

Using the new rural and urban definitions to provide a much more detailed picture of the variety of life across rural England, the 2005 State of the Countryside report highlights the differences in conditions and needs between the sparse (often peripheral) rural areas and those nearer to urban centres. It also shows the different trends in rural towns, villages and hamlets.

State of the Countryside 2005 (CRC 05), published by the Commission for Rural Communities, costs £10 from Countryside Agency Publications, PO Box 125, Wetherby LS23 7EP, telephone 0870 120 6466; fax 0870 120 6467.

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NOTES FOR EDITORS

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 operates 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