



## **Speech by Stuart Burgess, Chair of CRC and Rural Advocate, to the NALC Conference 'Putting people First'**

Royal College of Physicians, 4 September 2009

### **Introduction**

Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

It's a great pleasure to be invited to address the NALC Conference, for the third time, in my role as Chairman of the Commission for Rural Communities and the Government's Rural Advocate.

I have worked with NALC and its members throughout my career and the Commission has undertaken several joint initiatives with NALC.

I've met Cllr Michael Chater, your Chairman, on a number of occasions and we plan on visiting a rural council together later this year.

The role and remit of the CRC makes it a unique organisation, one well placed to help local councils in rural areas. Our work fits neatly with your conference theme, 'putting people first'. That's exactly what we're about, putting first the communities of rural England.

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

Our aim is to ensure that government policies are as well-informed, responsive and appropriate for rural people as they can be.

The work of the Commission is divided across rural services, rural places, rural economies and rural governance.

It is these latter two areas which I wish to talk to you about today.

### **Unitary authorities**

A major area of our governance work in 2009 has been focussed around the creation of new unitary authorities and the role of parish and town councils within unitary authorities.

The Government has initiated an array of policies to encourage community empowerment and the devolution of decision-making. These include extending the power of well-being to parish and town councils, encouraging the creation of new parishes (including in London), placing a duty on public service providers to involve the public in their decisions and supporting the transfer of assets to local communities.

Key government targets now measure communities' civic participation, belief in which they can influence local decisions, their sense of belonging to a neighbourhood and satisfaction with the local area.

We know that many rural communities struggle to make their voices heard locally (let alone regionally and nationally). We know that many rural people don't use their local councillors, or even know who they are.

We know that confusion exists in rural areas about which tier of government is responsible for what. We also knew that Dame Jane Roberts and her Councillors' Commission had been commissioned by CLG to review the role of councillors.

We developed an inquiry into this area, which fed into the Roberts Commission report, and also looked at the development of unitary councils.

I want to thank all those NALC members who contributed to this.

The CRC's participation inquiry found that creating unitary councils should strengthen and clarify local democracy and accountability, helping rural local government to punch its weight with city-regions and regional bodies.

In essence it recommended a structure of powerful new unitaries working closely with a renewed network of empowered parish and town councils.

Of course in April this year, nine new shire unitaries were created in the county areas of Bedfordshire, Cheshire, Cornwall, Durham, Northumberland, Shropshire and Wiltshire. Three further county areas – Devon, Norfolk and Suffolk – await decisions about going becoming unitary.

Our participation inquiry resulted in ten specific recommendations.

Briefly these were:

- Greater 'double devolution';
- Allocate neighbourhood budgets to local councillors;
- Local Strategic Partnerships should be given greater powers;
- The costs of democracy should be met by taxpayers nationally;
- Support parish councils to become fully elected representative bodies;
- Structure of powerful, new unitary authorities;
- All ward and parish councillors should produce annual reports;
- Local and national government should commit to supporting 'very local plans', by which we mean parish and market towns plans;
- We support the idea of a 'community call for action'; we want to see proposed reforms around petitioning actually actioned.

Many of these have been taken forward in conjunction with CLG, Defra and NALC, and through further research, including the 'Stepping Stones' conference earlier this year.

All these recommendations have tried to keep a focus on the particular rural challenges facing the devolution reform agenda. We believe that too often, these rural aspects get overlooked by government and others.

### **Role of parish and town councils within unitary authorities**

Rural areas are home to nine and a half million people or 20% of the English population. Many shire areas have three tiers of local government – county, district and parish or town councils – but increasingly they have just two tiers – unitary and parish or town councils.

In 2008 the CRC, with the National Association of Local Councils, commissioned a project to support parish and town councils and their County Associations of Local Councils to engage effectively with new unitary councils. This project has just come to fruition a month or so ago.

Phase one was research to find out the extent to which County Associations of Local Councils and Parish and Town Councils were managing to engage with the unitaries being established. It comprised a literature review, interviews with County Associations of Local Councils and a small survey of Parish and Town Councils.

Phase two produced both technical guidance and good practice case study material on two specific topics - service delegations to Parish and Town Councils and clustering by Parish and Town Councils - together with a guide on how to engage and a national seminar for County Associations of Local Councils to share good practice and begin considering how to build on the results of the work.

Copies of the just updated Executive Summary, together with two technical guidance notes are available from the CRC exhibition stand today.

Overall our research shows that the experience of the parish sector in engaging with, what were until this April, the nine 'shadow' unitaries, has mainly been positive.

But it also concluded that much of the value and benefit of unitary structures is achieved following their creation. This was certainly the case with the shire unitaries established in the 1990's.

### **Parish toolkits**

County Associations of Local Councils were keen to influence their new unitaries and most were optimistic about the opportunities for developing engagement with them. However, there were perceived barriers, including:

- new unitaries not always recognising the potential of Parish and Town Councils;
- a lack of capacity within County Associations of Local Councils to take on more engagement;
- and varying levels of ambition amongst Parish and Town Councils.

Bearing this in mind we have supported NALC's parish toolkit to help Parish and Town Councils engage with unitaries and put into action some of the recommendations of the participation inquiry.

The opportunities for positive engagement are very much there for the taking and I would encourage those of you that do sit within a unitary structure to consider what further steps you and your County Associations of Local Councils can take to engage with the new structures in order to see real benefits for the communities you represent.

### **Quality status**

The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme was launched in 2003 following the Government's Rural White Paper, 2000.

The aim of the Scheme is to provide benchmark minimum standards for parish and town councils.

The Scheme is supported by six National Stakeholders, the Commission for Rural Communities, the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Local Government Association, the National Association of Local Councils and the Society of Local Council Clerks.

DEFRA commissioned the University of Wales to review the Scheme in 2006 and their research helped the National Stakeholders to the Scheme to agree amendments that would help councils achieve ever higher levels of professionalism and help to cement their position as community leaders.

I would encourage local councils to keep renewing their quality status.

Also important is the training and development opportunities available to parish and town council officers.

### **Training/development for parish/town council officers**

The Commission has been a strong supporter of the County Training Partnerships (or County Training Partnerships) which implement the National Training Strategy, coordinating and delivering training at grass roots level.

Each county in England has a County Training Partnerships, initially funded by a grant from the National Training Strategy. A County Training Partnership is made up of all parties interested in training in the Parish and Town Councils sector (e.g. Society of Local Council Clerks, Rural Community Councils, County Associations of Local Councils, principal authority, college of further or higher education).

County Training Partnerships will advise clerks and councillors on what training options are available in their area.

The CRC has been delighted to make a modest contribution to developing a training scheme with CLG and DEFRA for rural clerks, to help the parish sector develop and improve its effectiveness and leadership. This includes a bursary training fund to help encourage training within smaller parish and town councils.

We hope this will help enable clerks and councils to be professionally equipped to manage council affairs on behalf of the communities they represent, thus helping to secure a strong voice for rural communities in decision making and putting their people first.

Part of this training includes the delivery of the core qualification for clerks: the CILCA, or Certificate in Local Council Administration.

## **CiLCA**

The CRC has also been delighted to support the continued success of the Certificate in Local Council Administration. This has become the core qualification for parish and town council clerks.

Over the last few years approaching 1,000 candidates have successfully passed the Certificate. This is a testament to the commitment to improvement and professionalism within the sector.

This is something we are in for the long term, as a helpful partner, to aid the sector in becoming stronger, more resilient, and ultimately more accessible and relevant to the rural communities they represent and manage.

### **Rural economy and recession reporting**

It would be nigh impossible of me to talk about rural communities and their local councils without discussing the economic concerns I hear from people when I visit towns and villages throughout rural England.

Last year seemed clouded by so much uncertainty about the future of the economy – every indicator was turning rapidly worse: economic growth and the stock market plunging downwards, unemployment beginning to spike sharply upwards.

Worries about how bad things would get and concerns about whether government was doing what it could for rural businesses.

Now we are in September 2009, and whilst we know things are going to be tough, we know it will be a hard few years – for businesses and for communities - the debilitating uncertainty has faded.

Having visited many communities and heard from those affected on the ground the inquiry concluded that whilst there were economic challenges and genuine hardship, there were also reasons to be positive.

And given all my travels and experiences across the country – meeting incredibly hard working and energetic businessmen and women - I'm not surprised! There's a sense of energy and entrepreneurship in rural areas that is very inspiring.

We have reasons to be positive about the economic future of rural areas;

- Growth in small and micro businesses has been much higher in rural than in the rest of the country;
- Rural has much higher levels of female entrepreneurs;
- Rural businesses are also more likely to export to international markets when compared to their urban counterparts.

We are also seeing signs of hope in emerging from the recession coming from rural – the sparsest rural areas have been the first areas where more people are finding work than registering as unemployed.

But I think we should also use this as an opportunity to think more widely about the way we view economic development.

## **Economic well-being**

The concept of economic 'well-being' is something we strongly favour at CRC and one I would recommend to you all.

Economic 'well-being' is the power under which much local authority economic intervention and activity is based, and of course devolution the economic agenda is a continuing.

It encompasses economic growth – jobs, new firms, business expansion, increasing investment - but embraces many communities, activities and interventions that those more narrowly focused- on competitiveness, prosperity and productivity - would probably not have entertained or imagined.

It is popularised by politicians and media as 'happiness' in economics, arising out of studies that have shown that the economic assumption that increasing wealth and income leads to a more satisfied population, is false.

Economic 'well-being' underpins the CRC approach and we are promoting it as more in tune with the dynamics and intimacy of rural households, work-life balance, and communities.

I believe it is more aligned to the message that only local authorities and agencies can truly understand diversity and dynamics of local areas and determine necessary interventions.

Local authorities have the power to take any steps which they consider are likely to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area or their inhabitants and the statutory duty to prepare community strategies to promote well-being, provided by the Local Government Act 2000. The well-being power could potentially provide the statutory backing required to take forward your projects.

The concept of economic 'well-being' chimes with the theme of this conference, 'putting people first'.

Let me give you an example I've seen for myself. In July, I visited Clatford Village Store, one of 4 community owned stores in Test Valley. The creation of the store was initiated and is now owned and managed by the local community.

It plays a crucial part in the local economy, providing essential retail services, particularly for vulnerable and excluded residents who are not able to access these services with their own transport.

At the same time, it is supporting community cohesion, providing a place of social interaction and a source of information on local facilities and events.

Helping communities like this to develop and create such unique ventures, and seeing the positive results on the faces of people I meet as Rural Advocate, refreshes my belief that the Commission for Rural Communities is needed by local communities the length and breadth of England.

## **Things to watch out for!**

Before closing and taking questions, I'd like to highlight one or two things you should watch out for before the end of this year – not that long to go!

We will be bringing our Uplands Inquiry to a close and delivering our report into the future for Upland communities in England to the Prime Minister.

This is a major piece of work, one I hope that will be referred to for years to come, making recommendations that will underpin the future of these vulnerable communities and the iconic landscapes they manage.

The inquiry has gathered evidence in a systematic way, using a variety of means, including:

- a public call for evidence, from which we received 112 detailed written submissions;
- inquiry hearings have been held in each of the six English regions with uplands - at these we received oral evidence from over 200 local and regional stakeholders;
- we commissioned research to hear directly from people who live and work in upland communities - involving focus groups and interviews across six very different upland locations;
- we analysed existing datasets to produce a State of the Countryside report specifically focused on the English uplands;
- and, the further development of an Evidence Base through a series of themed seminars that brought together expert knowledge and experience from the UK and overseas.

I think you'll agree that's *not insubstantial*.

Local authorities and councils in the uplands will want to take a look at this report and understand what change it might bring about.

We will be organising events to get your feedback and to explore the recommendations in more depth.

## **Rural Prospectus**

The lowlands needn't feel left out, since the next thing to watch out for will affect the whole of rural England.

Following on from Matthew Taylor's Affordable Rural Housing report 'A Living Working Countryside', a coalition of public and private organisations has come together to pursue the conclusions he outlined.

The Rural Coalition partners include: Local Government Association, Royal Town Planning Institute, Town and Country Planning Association, Country Land and Business Association, Action with Communities in Rural England, Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, Campaign to Protect Rural England - and of course, CRC.

In responding to the Taylor review the government noted that there was a growing consensus about what was needed in the English countryside, particularly for the creation and maintenance of sustainable communities, and the need to plan for economic recovery and expansion, in which a streamlined planning system would play a significant part.

But while we've seen this proactive response to all but two of the recommendations set out by Taylor – Government alone cannot achieve the changes that are needed.

This more positive approach requires engagement at national, regional and local levels of government. Far from being a 'free for all' approach to development in rural areas it requires thoughtful, evidence based policies implemented in a rigorous and transparent manner, to ensure the right development happens in the right place.

Rural communities must also face up to the challenges right in front of them. The effects of climate change and the recession will require some hard choices to be made.

The Rural Coalition has developed a 'prospectus' which maintains that a proactive planning approach is needed to ensure the creation and long term viability of sustainable rural communities.

I believe that local councils will have a very large stake in this indeed and it tallies with the agenda of greater community led planning and enabling greater development of affordable rural housing.

When the prospectus is published and the coalition is seeking further partners, I hope that NALC and its members will be some of the first to join up and bring frontline experiences to bear on the challenges and opportunities we collectively face.

## **Conclusion**

It would be touching on the glib to say that rural communities are facing challenging times. It is none the less true for all that, particularly so for those local councils who must help find solutions to these challenges.

To meet the challenges and keep on finding solutions that put people first, we're committed to working closely with partners and stakeholders, such as NALC.

Drawing upon the wealth of experience and expertise you hold to enrich our advisory function – and in so doing - to ensure that future government policy is as appropriate for rural areas as for urban ones.

This is very much a two way street – our research can highlight your needs – we can work together to find solutions – and your input can sharpen our influence with central government.

This is already working for both of us, and I hope to see many of you at the party conferences this year, when the Rural Receptions will mark 100yrs of rural at the heart of government, and NALC is a key partner with us in hosting these.

I hope you've found this an interesting and insightful overview of the Commission's role and work in rural governance and rural economies.

I feel the opportunities for collaboration between our two organisations are great and look forward to cultivating them further.

Thank you for your time.