

Rural Proofing in England: A Formal Commitment in Need of Review

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Summary

The Government launched its formal commitment to rural proof all domestic policies in the 2000 Rural White Paper. However, since then, progress with rural proofing has been patchy and inconsistent across Government Departments. There have been some notable successes, such as the rural proofing of the 2002 and 2004 Treasury Spending Reviews, but in the main rural proofing is not well embedded into Departments' policy making processes and tangible outcomes from rural proofing activity have been disappointing. Following the Modernising Rural Delivery Review and 2004 Rural Strategy, a greater range of organisations are involved in rural policy delivery at regional and local level, but confusion remains about their different responsibilities with regard to rural proofing. At a national level, the roles of Defra and the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) shifted following the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (2006) Act. Defra has taken on the role of rural proofing 'champion', yet it has become increasingly pre-occupied with climate change and sustainability issues. In 2007, in its role as 'rural watchdog' with responsibility for monitoring rural proofing, the CRC called for a review of rural proofing. This paper examines the process of rural proofing and, with reference to the shifting policy and institutional context for rural affairs, reviews its history and success drawing particularly on the annual reports produced by the Countryside Agency/CRC since 2001. It then discusses the future for rural proofing in the context of the Government's mainstreaming agenda, and draws on the recent rural proofing review to suggest ways in which rural proofing activity may be strengthened.

Introduction

The Government's formal commitment to rural proof all of its domestic policies – in short, to 'think rural' when developing and implementing policies - was introduced in the 2000 Rural White Paper (DETR/MAFF, 2000), and was subsequently refreshed in the 2004 Rural Strategy. While individual policy makers have responsibility for undertaking rural proofing as they design and develop policies within their Government Departments, Defra acts as rural proofing champion across government, and the CRC (and prior to that, the Countryside Agency) is responsible for independently monitoring rural proofing progress by Government Departments and Government Offices in the Regions (GOs), most notably through the production of an annual rural proofing report. Although there have been some rural proofing successes, these reports note inconsistent progress over the last seven years.

In its 2007 report, the CRC argued that "the importance of rural proofing has not diminished" and that it should be "re-established" (CRC, 2007a, p.2-3), and it called for a review of the process. Alongside this, Defra has also recently been reviewing all of its activities and policies, including rural proofing and mainstreaming, the latter being an agenda which has been gathering pace across Government. Mainstreaming refers to the need for rural circumstances to be considered as part of everyday policy making and not separately throughout government. Recently, however, rural issues have fallen off the national political agenda as the attention of Defra civil servants has increasingly been focused on climate change and sustainability debates (Ward and Lowe, 2007). Regionally and locally, the institutional set-up and responsibilities for delivering rural policy have become ever more complex.

Almost eight years since it was formally launched, and given this shifting institutional and policy context, this paper provides a timely review of the process of rural proofing and its achievements since the 2000 Rural White Paper. Sections 2-4 describe what rural proofing is, how it is done and who it is done by. Section 5 reviews progress with rural proofing drawing on the evidence contained in the annual rural proofing reports produced by the Countryside Agency and CRC. Finally, Section 6 discusses how rural proofing may develop in future, with reference to the mainstreaming agenda.

What is rural proofing?

At the time of the 2000 Rural White Paper there was a long-standing charge against the Government that it did not adequately 'think rural' when developing and implementing policies (DETR/MAFF, 2000). The Labour Government elected under Tony Blair was regarded by many as being particularly insensitive to rural concerns (Lowe and Ward, 2001, p.389; Ward and Lowe, 2007). In recognition of this, the 2000 Rural White Paper contained a 'clear and continuing' formal

commitment for the Government to undertake systematic procedures to ensure that all of its policies, programmes and initiatives, both nationally and regionally, take account of rural circumstances and needs. Therefore, as part of the policy making process, through from design to delivery, policy makers should systematically 'think rural' by:

- Considering whether their policy is likely to have a different impact in rural areas, because of particular rural circumstances or needs;
- Making a proper assessment of those impacts, if these are likely to be significant;
- Adjusting the policy, where necessary, with solutions to meet rural needs and circumstances (DETR/MAFF, 2000).

The Rural White Paper gave the Countryside Agency a rural proofing monitoring and reporting role, backed up by national and regional sounding boards bringing together rural interests. This role as rural watchdog represented a significant and high profile role for a statutory body, and a role that had the potential to ensure that rural issues were not overlooked, but rather were at the heart of Whitehall policy making (Lowe and Ward, 2001, p.389). Government Departments and GOs were charged with providing evidence of rural proofing activity to the Agency for its independent annual rural proofing report.

Each Government Department has a designated central contact to co-ordinate rural proofing activity. The White Paper made provision for regular meetings between this contact and Countryside Agency staff and suggested that, where possible, Departments should undertake rural pilots of programmes and policies and develop targets and monitoring systems for key programmes to identify their rural impacts. Policy makers would be equipped with improved rural policy and skills awareness through training and secondment activities (DETR/MAFF, 2000). The White Paper also confirmed the need for the Government to take full account of the rural dimension at regional level and that GOs would work in partnership with a range of organisations in delivering rural policies and programmes and in ensuring a more co-ordinated approach to rural data and information collection and sharing (ibid.). GOs were charged with providing an individual annual rural report to central Government and collectively reporting on the regional implications of national rural policy developments, drawing on the Countryside Agency's regional offices for advice where necessary.

How policies are rural proofed

Following the 2000 Rural White Paper, the Countryside Agency produced a policy makers' checklist, providing a systematic framework for rural proofing (Countryside Agency, 2002a)¹. The checklist should be applied from the early stages of policy making, although it may also be used during implementation and evaluation. It is designed to act as a screening tool, and contains a series of questions for policy makers to work through when designing a policy and some considerations for appropriate rural adjustments, with a suggestion that they contact the Countryside Agency for advice when necessary. For example, the checklist asks whether a policy is likely to cost more to deliver in rural areas where clients are more widely dispersed or economies of scale harder to achieve. If so, it suggests that policy makers might wish to consider solutions such as higher unit delivery costs in funding formulae (*e.g.* a 'sparsity' factor) or encouraging joint provision to reduce costs. The results of any policy appraisals that take place (including solutions adopted) should be fed into the decision-making process and details should be included in the Department's annual rural proofing report.

However, the checklist has two important limitations. First, it only covers the more typical policy challenges presented by rural areas, raising questions as to how a single checklist can account for the huge diversity of circumstances across rural England. The need for more than a national 'one-size-fits-all' approach was recognised in the North East in 2005, for example, when a regional task and finish group met to develop rural proofing toolkits for the different sub-regions (Northumberland Strategic Partnership, 2006). Second, the checklist is not a substitute for consultation with rural communities, businesses or organisations. This limitation reflects a major criticism of the checklist: that it is nothing more than a ticklist exercise for Government Departments that does not require a real, in-depth consideration of the challenges that rural areas present. Yet undertaking such a consideration demands that policy makers have adequate training, advice, information and guidance on rural proofing and that they have access to reliable and appropriate evidence on the situation in rural areas.

The checklist also raises two fundamental questions about the process of rural proofing. First, it states that if the policy impact is likely to be significantly different in rural areas, policy options to produce the desired outcomes or avoid/mitigate any undesirable impacts should be explored. But who decides if an impact is 'significantly' different and how is that decision reached? The checklist also states that "This exercise may also highlight opportunities to maximise positive impacts in rural areas" (Countryside Agency, 2002a, p.5). In her Foreword to the 2003/04 rural proofing monitoring report, Pam Warhurst (Acting Chair of the Agency at the time) noted that "Often policies are being amended or refined to take account of rural issues; to try and ensure that rural communities or

¹ A range of other guidance has been produced for organisations operating in other sectors drawing on the Agency's checklist (see for example, the Improvement and Development Agency and Rural Stress Information Network websites; NCVO 2007; SOLACE and CRC, 2005).

areas *benefit*" (Countryside Agency, 2004a, p.2, italics added). Is rural proofing therefore about favouring rural areas? Would that be fair to urban areas? Or is it about ensuring that the impact of a policy is neutral or, at the very least, not negative, for rural areas?

Who does rural proofing?

Ultimately, the responsibility for rural proofing lies with policy makers working to design, develop, implement and evaluate policies in their respective Departments. They are therefore expected to have some knowledge of rural issues to be able, at the very least, to recognise policies that may have a differential impact, although assistance is available from designated Departmental rural proofing contacts and from the CRC (and formerly the Countryside Agency) as required. The 2000 Rural White Paper gave responsibility for monitoring rural proofing to the Countryside Agency through the production of their annual report on the work of Government Departments and GOs. The Cabinet Committee on Rural Affairs (established prior to the 2000 White Paper) was intended to play an important role in overseeing the development and implementation of the Government's policies on the rural economy and rural communities and in driving forward the rural proofing agenda, but it was wound down. The Rural Affairs Forum for England (formally established in January 2002 but replaced by new arrangements, proposed in the Haskins Review and confirmed in the Rural Strategy 2004) also had a role in rural proofing at the national level, through its role as a 'national sounding board' with direct contact with a range of rural groups and the Regional Rural Affairs Forums (RRAFs).

Four years on, the 2004 Rural Strategy and Modernising Rural Delivery (MRD) Review offered an opportunity to review progress with, and re-emphasise the importance of, rural proofing. It also represented a challenging time for rural proofing with a larger range of organisations involved in rural policy making and delivery locally and regionally, and organisational restructuring at the national level, with the demise of the Countryside Agency and the establishment of the much smaller CRC. As set out in the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) (2006) Act, CRC and Defra responsibilities in relation to rural policy development and implementation changed, including with respect to the process of rural proofing. Together, Defra and the CRC have a shared objective to realise the Government's commitment to rural proofing and to promote the concept and practice across a wide range of organisations including local authorities and other bodies and sectors. However, the onus is still very much on policy-makers nationally, regionally and sub-regionally to 'do' rural proofing. The NERC Act gave the CRC a rural watchdog role, with a widened rural proofing monitoring role, enabling the CRC to both advise on and judge how the rural proofing process is undertaken by organisations as they develop their strategies, and to provide Government Departments and other bodies with an impartial, expert view on the way in which their policies are meeting rural needs. The CRC was also given a role in providing some leadership for rural proofing, in proactively developing it, in independently advising and

challenging Departments on specific issues or policies, and in promoting rural proofing outside government, for example to the private and voluntary sectors.

Defra's roles as set out in the NERC Act are to champion rural proofing within Government and to take the lead on setting and promoting rural proofing policy to Government bodies at all levels. Defra's other role is to advise colleagues across Government (again at all levels) on how to deliver their rural proofing responsibilities most effectively and how best they can support delivery of the Government's rural agenda. The GO rural leads deliver these responsibilities on behalf of Defra below the national level, and they also have a function to rural proof the activities of all the organisations with a part to play in the regional delivery framework, including Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and Regional Assemblies. Sub-regionally, the role of local authorities is to rural proof "all policies to ensure that they can be delivered locally" ... and to "feed back local issues to regional Government" (Countryside Agency, 2004b, p.2)². Rural Community Councils also have a role in feeding the views of local rural residents and others into the process of rural policy making.³

What has been achieved since 2000?

The Countryside Agency's (now the CRC's) annual reports provide a regular review of progress with rural proofing since 2000. The first report in 2001/02 (Countryside Agency, 2002b) notes that the Agency had circulated its checklist fairly widely within Government and that most Government Departments had completed the initial steps to implement rural proofing as set out in the Rural White Paper. Each Department had a designated person to be the main contact point on rural issues, with regular liaison taking place between the Agency and that individual. However, less than half of Government Departments had built rural proofing into any existing policy-making and appraisal systems or promoted it internally and there was only modest evidence of an increase in the degree of rural awareness and thinking by policy-makers (ibid.).

In the 2003 and 2004 reports, the overall message was again one of mixed progress across Departments, although both reports note year-on-year progress (Countryside Agency, 2003; 2004a). Rural issues were being discussed across a wider range of policy areas and rural proofing was increasingly becoming a routine and integral part of some Departments' policy making, although often not early enough in the process. The most successful outcomes were achieved when rural proofing was integrated into policy-making from the outset and/or where it had senior level support, such as rural proofing the 2002 and 2004 Treasury Spending Reviews (Countryside

² The launch of the eight Rural Delivery Pathfinders in 2005 represented an attempt to tackle the lack of clarity over the role of local authorities in securing the delivery of rural policy goals for their communities (Defra, 2008, p.6). One of the key themes that recurred across the Pathfinders was a recognition that rural proofing techniques had limitations and that the guidance was not readily understood by many service managers. There was widespread agreement that current approaches to rural proofing, and the reasons for doing it at all, should be reviewed and refreshed (Defra, 2008, p.8).

³ It could also be argued that other organisations have a role in rural proofing. For example, the Centre for Rural Economy was asked by One NorthEast (the RDA in the North East region) in 2005 to rural proof the Regional Economic Strategy.

Agency, 2003; Countryside Agency, 2004a) and the building of a rural dimension into Departmental PSA targets (Countryside Agency, 2004a). However, some failures were also noted, not least the disappointing scale of tangible outcomes from rural proofing, although this was sometimes due to Departmental under-reporting rather than an absence of rural proofing. Data limitations and the lack of urban-rural markers for datasets were seen as weaknesses (Countryside Agency, 2003). Therefore the launch of the new urban-rural definition in 2004 was seen as an important step forward (Countryside Agency, 2004a). It was noted that further work was needed with more regional and local actors to formally extend rural proofing responsibilities to these tiers of government, where most delivery takes place. The 2004 Rural Strategy and MRD Review were recognised as offering opportunities to extend responsibilities and to re-emphasise the role of rural proofing.

The 2004/05 report (CRC, 2005) was the first to be produced by the CRC (as an operating division of the Countryside Agency), and for the first time it brought together an assessment of rural proofing delivery and progress with the Rural Service Standard. The report acknowledged that responsibility for rural policy and delivery may rest with a range of different bodies as a result of the increasing devolution of public service priority setting and delivery to bodies at the regional and local level (ibid., p.7). It noted that the success of rural proofing will not be judged with reference to policy processes alone, but also with reference to the actual impact of rural proofing on the quality of life of rural communities on the ground (ibid., p.2). The report makes more explicit recognition of the diversity of circumstances that rural proofing must reflect. Examples of key successes noted in the report are the building of a rural checklist into Regulatory Impact Assessment⁴; the Treasury's requirement for all Departments to rural proof their budget assessments and to ensure that all PSAs can only be met if they are implemented in both urban and rural communities; and particular cases where rural proofing is having a positive impact, for example in terms of the Countryside Communities programme of the Big Lottery Fund (ibid.). The report also notes some tangible outcomes from rural proofing activity, such as the inclusion of a sparsity weighting in the Department for Trade and Industry's broadband grant.

However, the overall message from the 2005 rural proofing report is not markedly different from previous years, with a sense of some achievements and successes, but also a recognition that rural proofing still does not deliver everything wished for by the CRC or rural communities (ibid.). Particular challenges are the delay between the national formulation of policy and its implementation and delivery locally (ibid., p.11, 13).

Regionally, the report also notes mixed progress, with a "...need for some further clarification of the roles (and the resourcing) of rural proofing at the regional level; in particular with regard to the key regional strategic documents including spatial, housing and economic strategies" (ibid., p.9).

⁴ Regulatory Impact Assessment is an analysis of the likely impacts of a policy change and the range of options for implementing it. As of May 2007, RIA has been replaced by Impact Assessment (Cabinet Office 2005).

The report notes the need for more systematic rural proofing by local authorities and better mechanisms for identifying and sharing best practice between local authorities (ibid., p.10). Moving forward, the report notes that rural proofing must address core issues of funding and resource allocation, that there should be more widespread use of the urban-rural definition across Government, and that there needs to be much stronger means of drawing on the experiences and concerns of rural people in informing monitoring work and hence influencing change (ibid., p.4).

The 2006 report (the first to be produced by an independent CRC), took a different approach to reporting rural proofing activity, incorporating evidence from policy makers on rural proofing a sample of policies and complementary advice and opinion from national and regional stakeholders on the evidence gathered (CRC, 2006, p.2). However, the overall message is again the same, with a failure by policy makers to systematically undertake rural proofing and use the urban-rural definition, and few processes in place to check the impacts of any rural proofing that is taking place, although the report cites some examples of good practice, including Defra's Climate Change Adaptation Framework and the creation of regional sub-groups to consider the rural aspects of Regional Spatial Strategies (ibid., p.7). There is an acknowledgement that Defra is beginning to establish itself successfully as rural proofing champion across Government, although also a recognition of the need for it to develop a more proactive strategy for promoting rural proofing. Third sector organisations are also called on to do more to rural proof their activities. The report outlines a number of specific actions to bring about better scrutiny of rural proofing, by Parliamentary Select Committees (especially the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee), the National Audit Office and Audit Commission and by Regional Rural Affairs Forums and Regional Assemblies.

The most recent rural proofing report (CRC, 2007a) again notes disappointment with the inconsistent performance of Government Departments in only partially meeting their commitment, with rural proofing largely reliant on the judgments of individual policy makers rather than being embedded into the day to day systems, cultures and processes of Departments (ibid., p.9). Support tools, such as the checklist and Regulatory Impact Assessment are not being used to undertake systematic rural proofing. Where a policy has a specific spatial element to its implementation, rural proofing is more likely to have occurred (although not necessarily early in the policy making process), and lobbying from external interest groups and stakeholder engagements and consultations were found to be effective at bringing about rural proofing (ibid., p.2). GOs particularly highlighted the approach of local needs driven implementation as a good way of rural proofing delivery, although such refinements are not always enough to meet the additional cost pressures faced in order to implement policy and deliver services in rural areas (ibid., p.11). The report also notes that monitoring and reporting systems are often not adequately set up to allow the impacts of a policy on rural areas to be assessed and compared to the effects on other areas.

In summary, the report notes that “It is clear that there is more to be done to mainstream properly and systematically, ‘rural’ into the work of Government Departments” (ibid., p.17).

Therefore since 2000, the overriding message from the annual rural proofing reports has remained largely unchanged; some specific successes have been achieved and rural issues are more widely known about but overall progress with rural proofing remains inconsistent and disappointing. Direct evidence of rural proofing outcomes is limited, although this may be as much due to inadequate monitoring and under-reporting as to a lack of systematic progress. Opportunities to strengthen rural proofing, at the time of the MRD Review or the formation of the CRC, seem to have been missed, and responsibilities with regard to rural proofing (particularly at the regional level) remain confused. These key messages are repeated in other recent CRC work, including the 2007 Rural Advocate’s report in which one of the overarching themes is the need for better rural proofing both nationally and sub-nationally (CRC, 2008a, p.27). In his recent report on England’s rural economies (CRC, 2008b) the Rural Advocate again calls on the Government to demonstrate a greater and more transparent commitment to rural proofing relevant policies, research, evaluations, speeches, consultations and so on, drawing on the CRC for advice. The Government’s recent *“Enterprise: Unlocking the UK’s Talent”* and *“Innovation Nation”* reports are specifically mentioned as illustrating the need for better rural proofing.

What is the future for rural proofing?

In the 2007 rural proofing report, the CRC Chairman noted that the organisation is looking to re-establish and strengthen rural proofing over the coming months, and to consider reforms to the process. The report was designed to mark the beginning of a period of consultation and reflection aiming to see rural proofing ‘refreshed’ (CRC, 2007a, p.3). GHK consultants were appointed to facilitate and lead discussions with policy making and delivery staff about how to take rural proofing forward. Their report revealed a number of barriers to successful rural proofing, including a lack of familiarity amongst policy makers about sources of information, advice and guidance and about the 2004 urban-rural definition, a lack of understanding about when rural proofing is needed and spatial blindness amongst policy makers in central government. The report also revealed confusion between central and regional/local government about who is responsible for rural proofing, with policy makers in central government often feeling that rural proofing is less important where you have a principle that those who have to deliver a policy have local flexibility; on the other hand, the report revealed a perception amongst local and regional government that the ‘missing link’ is central government (GHK, 2008). This review has been taking place in the context of shifting Government policy drivers. Three such drivers are particularly important: climate change and environmental sustainability, mainstreaming and devolution. Although the creation of Defra was partly aimed at raising the profile of rural affairs within Government, the Department’s attention has become ever more focused on climate change and environmental sustainability,

leading to rural issues becoming politically marginalised and being allocated ever diminishing staff and financial resources. This has led to concerns that it is not adequately equipped or strongly enough inclined to act as a forceful champion of rural interests with the RDAs (with their increased responsibilities for promoting the social and economic welfare of rural areas), or indeed across other Government Departments (Ward and Lowe, 2007, p.8). Moreover, other 'rural champions', such as the Countryside Agency, the Rural Affairs Forum for England and the Market Towns Advisory Forum have been wound down. It will be interesting to see the extent to which the transference of Defra's climate change responsibilities to a newly created Department of Energy and Climate Change (as announced in Gordon Brown's October 2008 Cabinet reshuffle) will open up the possibility of a refocusing of attention on rural issues.

Mainstreaming refers to the consideration of rural circumstances as part of everyday policy making rather than separately throughout Government. In a speech to the Local Government Association in March 2007, Barry Gardiner MP set out Defra's case for mainstreaming, arguing that rural issues are simply reflections of wider societal questions and should be addressed by the Government as such and that, although Defra will continue to provide a lead within Government on rural issues, there is a need to ensure that rural needs and priorities are understood in wider Government activity, including at the regional and sub-regional level. For example, rural disadvantage or rural housing needs should be taken into account in mainstream policy and delivery not through stand-alone, area-based 'rural' projects and programmes. Gardiner argues that the diversity of rural areas in England means that a simple rural proofing exercise is not enough, an argument that chimes with the Government's place agenda which advocates the tailoring of national policy to local circumstance whether it is rural or urban. Gardiner's speech sets out a much clearer and more central role for local government in 'community proofing' than was the case for rural proofing (Gardiner, 2007). The CRC (2007a, p.19) acknowledges that mainstreaming represents an important opportunity to refresh rural proofing, but it also argues that it should not cloud the purpose of rural proofing, which is to see improved outcomes for rural communities (ibid., p.4-5). The CRC argues that mainstreaming should certainly not replace the need for Defra to lead the way within Government on rural issues, for continued reporting by CRC on rural proofing activity or for a continued drive to develop effective rural proofing at regional and local levels and across different sectors.

Defra's report on the Rural Delivery Pathfinders contains further discussion about the future of rural proofing (Defra, 2008). It acknowledges the concern that rural areas (and what makes them distinctive) risk being ignored if policies and programmes are not explicitly examined and modified, but argues that this might be looking the wrong way through the telescope. Rather than seeking to defend rural interests by basing policies on rural needs, the argument should be that rural areas make a positive contribution to the overall health – economic, environmental and social – of an area, and so should benefit from interventions directed at improving this overall health. At the same

time, this should not set aside the need for techniques to ensure that the interventions work in rural as well as urban areas and the need to recognise the existence of the 'rural premium'⁵ (ibid., p.33). This argument is echoed by Lowe and Ward (2007, p.315-6), who argue that Defra has an important role in advising on the relevance of rural proofing and a key part of this is presenting rural areas as places that offer creative, enterprising assets (not just connected with primary production) without which wider society would suffer, as well as significant challenges. In this way the emphasis is placed on rural areas being able to make a full contribution to economic prosperity and therefore being entitled to equitable attention in mainstream policies and programmes, rather than rural proofing being seen as special pleading.

The third key policy driver is devolution. The process of devolving rural delivery to the regional and local levels was laid out in the 2004 Rural Strategy but this agenda has grown in importance, as evident in the recent Government Sub-national economic development and regeneration review (HM Treasury, 2007). The review empowers all local authorities to promote economic development and neighbourhood renewal, sets local authorities up as place-shaping leaders and emphasises the primacy of Local Area Agreements (LAAs) and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) for target setting and delivery at the local level. RDAs are given a more strategic role, with responsibility for developing a single, integrated Regional Strategy (which will be signed off by local authorities). Defra (2008, p. 34) argues that the Pathfinder projects have shown what can be achieved if rural delivery issues are given prominence and impetus within a local authority or sub-region, supported by the development of local rural proofing policies and practices and underpinned by service standards that ensure that rural people are not unfairly disadvantaged. If mainstreaming rural issues into LAAs is seen as the way forward then it follows that Defra's rural proofing efforts (assisted by the GOs) would most usefully be channelled into ensuring that central government guidance on LAAs supports the ambitions of those local authorities who aim to serve well their rural communities. In particular, the measurement of the 198 national indicators will need to be carried out with rural as well as urban needs in mind, requiring the adoption of the rural-urban definition. The new comprehensive area assessment framework (as proposed in the Local Government White Paper) may provide an extra opportunity to address rural needs within local authority areas. A one-size-fits-all national approach to rural proofing is not appropriate so the challenge is for local actors to design the correct delivery measures and ensure that outcome indicators facilitate local tailoring of mainstream funding, such as that coming through RDAs. This is in line with the notion of community proofing whereby national policies are flexible and can be tailored to diverse local circumstances and needs, whether rural or urban (Defra, 2008, p.34). The overall thrust of these policy drivers is that Defra should spend less effort on niche rural programmes, which may have limited resourcing and impacts, which may encourage policy makers to see delivery to rural communities as a marginal activity and which may raise unrealistic expectations of additional resources to deliver mainstream services in a rural context. Instead, more effort should be spent on effectively delivered

⁵ The 'rural premium' refers to the extra costs of providing services to people living in rural areas as opposed to those living in urban areas.

longer term programmes and resource allocation systems that will impinge on all kinds of rural services and the delivery of public policies in rural areas (Lowe and Ward, 2007, p.315). An example of this is discussed in the Rural Advocate's recent report on rural economies (CRC, 2008b) where it is argued that much of the unfulfilled potential of rural economies can be delivered through better access and adjustments to national and regional economic programmes. Separate new national rural programmes may cut across urban-rural interdependencies and run counter to the desirability of devolving responsibility for supporting rural economies to more local levels, not just those that operate only in rural areas. Nevertheless, there are some rural districts or localities that merit distinct rural initiatives because of their sparsity, size, or distinct environmental or social characteristics that affect the nature or effectiveness of economic interventions (ibid., p.42). Equally, there are some key policies and programmes that are explicitly designed to meet the needs of rural people and places (such as the Rural Development Programme for England). Such targeted funding can be used in parallel with mainstreamed funding to create a coherent overall programme of rural delivery interventions (Defra, 2008, p.30).

Without doubt this mainstreamed approach to rural issues demands a strengthened process of rural proofing at all spatial levels, to work in tandem with it. There are long-standing barriers to rural proofing that need to be overcome, however, including the lack of experience and knowledge amongst policy makers across Government Departments, proofing overload (with policy makers possibly having to undertake rural, climate change, ageing, gender and sustainable development proofing amongst others), a lack of compulsion to rural proof, an incomplete evidence base and the short time scale for policy formulation (Countryside Agency, 2004a). Lowe and Ward (2007) suggest a number of ways in which rural proofing could be strengthened, including the establishment of a rural proofing unit in Defra and regular reports to an appropriate Cabinet sub-committee which would help to embed the effectiveness of rural proofing as a process across Government, perhaps accompanied by a rural proofing code of practice adopted by Government Departments. Further suggestions are made by GHK (2008), including better promotion of the CRC's role and rural issues in Government Departments and increasing awareness and understanding of rural proofing (e.g. by showing where outcomes have benefited rural areas because of the processes followed). A stronger argument can be made by emphasising that considering rural means better policy making for all people, rather than by special pleading for rural areas.

Regionally and locally, there is a need for a clearer set of responsibilities with regard to rural proofing and greater encouragement for the relevant organisations to take a stronger role. For example, RDA Rural Board members could play a role in monitoring and assessing funding going to rural areas (to reduce the risk of frustration amongst rural communities who see what they consider to be a lack of funding for rural initiatives as rural programmes increasingly become part of general regeneration initiatives) and GOs should play a greater role in co-ordinating, influencing and

championing rural issues across other regional organisations. Adequate scrutiny arrangements are required to ensure that rural issues are embedded in the new Integrated Regional Strategies and rural communities need to feel engaged so as to influence policy making at regional and local levels. In the North East, the Rural Affairs Forum (NERAF) has been engaged in the Interim Regional Strategy Advisory Group and has been testing out a discussion based approach to rural proofing between policy/strategy providers and service users or citizens. This approach of policy makers working alongside NERAF members to rural proof their policy has been widely welcomed in the North East region and in response NERAF has produced a set of questions for members to use when assisting with rural proofing. NERAF is also leading work to strengthen regional working with CRC, One NorthEast (the RDA in the North East), the GO in the North East and other organisations, and there is a regional task and finish group scoping out the rural mainstreaming task, which is being coordinated by ONE (Rowe, 2008). The production of a North East Rural Priorities Statement by the North East Rural Board should assist organisations to work more effectively in partnership towards the achievement of common goals (North East Rural Board, 2007). Nevertheless, as RRAFs are increasingly under pressure to drive forward rural issues in the regions, they are working with limited resources and constantly face the challenge of adequately representing a wide range of rural interests.

It seems that there is general consensus that as mainstreaming becomes a more important policy driver, the importance of rural proofing has not diminished and thus the process needs to be reviewed and strengthened within this changed context. Mainstreaming funding into rural proofed programmes is likely to be the most effective way of securing improvements to rural services and local economies, providing that the 'rural premium' is recognised (i.e. acknowledging that delivery solutions may vary between urban and rural areas to ensure that no place is unfairly disadvantaged). Despite its apparent pre-occupation elsewhere, Defra must continue to play a role in working with Government Departments to ensure that guidance on LAAs supports local authorities seeking to ensure that the needs of rural communities are met through mainstream programmes (CRC, 2007b, p.34). More broadly, Defra has a role in demonstrating to key government, private and third sector decision-makers, the breadth and depth of the contributions that rural areas make to the achievement of their goals and targets, thereby raising the positive profile of rural areas. More widespread use of the 2004 Urban-Rural Definition will help to ensure that an accurate evidence base is available to highlight these positive contributions but also to show where the needs of rural communities may vary from those of other communities. There is a strong argument for strengthening the role of the Rural Minister in these processes, and perhaps linking his/her role more strongly to the work of the CRC.

The CRC must continue its important monitoring role through the production of annual rural proofing reports and through encouraging more widespread use of the urban-rural definition. It may also have a role to play in conducting occasional separate reviews for Government Departments to develop solutions to particular rural issues (using a similar approach as the Affordable Rural Housing Commission in 2005). In working across rural and urban areas, Natural England may be able to offer valuable lessons for other organisations working with both rural and urban areas (CRC, 2007b).

At a regional and local level it is critical that rural policy and delivery issues are consolidated in the mainstream corporate frameworks of local authorities and partner organisations. For example, the RDAs have a statutory responsibility to consider rural needs and circumstances (as set out in the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998) and this must be explicitly recognised. The changes proposed within the sub-national review offer the opportunity to do this locally where local authorities would take on much more important roles as strategic leaders and place shapers. Consulting and engaging with elected local members and local communities is also an essential part of the process of securing optimal decisions on rural delivery, and lessons can be learned from the Pathfinder projects with their activities 'mainstreamed' more widely into the work of local authorities (CRC, 2007b, p.16). Rather than seeing mainstreaming as a threat to rural areas, it should be used to provide new impetus to rural proofing at all levels of Government and across all organisations. Without doubt modifications are required to ensure that policy-makers understand what rural proofing entails, who should be undertaking it and how to undertake it thus making training and learning opportunities available to staff across all relevant organisations is vital. More broadly, there is a need to increase understanding and awareness of the positive contribution that rural areas can make to regional economies such that all organisations need to be confident that their key documents, strategies and policies - even though they may no longer explicitly refer to rural - have been developed and are implemented with a heightened awareness and sensitivity to rural circumstances.

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