



Consultation on the new rural policy functions within Government and the proposed abolition of the Commission for Rural Communities

Views of CEDOS & ADEPT

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The Chief Economic Development Officers Society (CEDOS) provides a forum for Heads of Economic Development in upper tier local authorities throughout England. Membership includes county, city and unitary Councils in non-metropolitan areas. The Society carries out research, develops and disseminates best practice, and publishes reports on key issues for economic development policy and practice. Through its collective expertise, it seeks to play its full part in helping to inform and shape national and regional policies and initiatives.

The Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport (ADEPT) represents local authority Strategic Directors who manage some of the most pressing issues facing the UK today. The expertise of ADEPT members and their vision is fundamental in the handling of issues that affect all our lives. Operating at the strategic tier of local government they are responsible for crucial transport, waste management, environment, planning, energy and economic development issues. ADEPT membership is drawn from all four corners of the United Kingdom.

CONSULTATION ON THE NEW RURAL POLICY FUNCTIONS WITHIN GOVERNMENT AND THE PROPOSED ABOLITION OF THE COMMISSION FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES

Views of the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport (ADEPT) and the Chief Economic Development Officers Society (CEDOS)

1. CEDOS and ADEPT welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the new rural policy functions within Government and the proposed abolition of the Commission for Rural Communities. We are pleased to put forward our views, both overall and in response to the specific questions in the consultation document. Our views have been formulated in the light of consulting with our members from across the country.

Overall views

2. We welcome the decision to strengthen Defra's rural team to create the Rural Communities Policy Unit (RCPU) and we support its immediate objectives. However, as a small unit, we consider there must be a very real risk that RCPU will lack the capacity and the ability to provide a sufficiently objective view of rural needs and circumstances and the independence necessary to challenge thinking and policy development across Government. In our detailed response to the consultation questions, we set out our views on the approach needed by the RCPU to gather evidence and intelligence, to consult widely in developing its initiatives and to be proactive and translate its influence into tangible action. Both our organisations look forward to working closely with RCPU in this context.

3. We welcome the Government's open minded approach in consulting on the proposal to abolish the Commission for Rural Communities. Having taken soundings from our members, we believe there will be real benefit in retaining the Commission to continue its statutory functions of advice, advocacy and watchdog, with its particular focus on rural disadvantage and economic underperformance. Particularly given the relatively modest savings involved, we believe that the removal of the CRC as an independent voice for rural areas is too great a price to pay.

Views in response to the specific consultation questions

1. Is there anything more, or different, the RCPU should be doing to ensure fair, practical and affordable outcomes can be achieved on behalf of rural residents, businesses and communities?

CEDOS/ADEPT Views

4. We welcome the decision to strengthen Defra's rural team to create the Rural Communities Policy Unit (RCPU). The Unit, which is now operational, is intended to:

- be a centre of rural expertise within Government;
- strengthen Defra's relationships with rural organisations and commentators who advocate on behalf of rural people and businesses;
- support and coordinate rural policy within and beyond Defra; and
- have an important role in helping all Government Departments to ensure that their policies are effectively 'rural proofed' before decisions are made.

5. We support the immediate objectives of the RCPU to:

- identify issues of critical importance to rural communities and then support, inform and influence the development and implementation of relevant Government policy so as to achieve fair, practical and affordable outcomes for rural residents, businesses and communities; and
- develop open and collaborative approaches to gathering information, evidence and potential solutions working closely with a wide range of organisations which support and represent rural communities.

6. The critical question, though, is whether a small unit, however well intentioned, that is located within Government and is answerable to Ministers will be able to meet these objectives. One of the key assumptions in the impact assessment of the Government's proposals¹ published alongside the consultation document is that "a small unit of civil servants will be able to adequately understand and represent concerns and priorities of rural people and businesses". There must be a very real risk that this assumption will prove unfounded in terms of the RCPU's capacity and its ability to provide a sufficiently objective view of rural needs and circumstances and to have the independence necessary to challenge thinking and policy development across Government.

7. This is illustrated in the choice of the 3 main initiatives identified in the consultation document that RCPU is pursuing in its attempts to identify priority policy areas for rural communities:

- the development of measures for the Rural Economy Growth Review;
- a Government-wide Rural Statement outlining how Government policies and programmes are already working for rural communities and explaining what Defra and the RCPU will be doing to promote rural needs and interests in the future;

¹ *Consultation on the proposed abolition of the CRC: Impact Assessment* Defra November 2011

- a statement of Government's commitment to rural proofing and a new package of rural proofing materials.

8. Whilst these initiatives are undoubtedly worthwhile, they appear to be largely driven and prioritised by existing Government policy. Measures to grow the rural economy are clearly very important but so too is action to meet the needs of disadvantaged rural areas and communities, which has been a particular focus of the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) and which appears to be missing from the RCPU's priorities. Building on the work of the CRC in identifying and developing approaches to tackle rural disadvantage should be one of the priority areas of the RCPU.

9. There is also a rather passive feel about the stated initiatives – outlining what Government policies are already doing, explaining what it will be doing and re-stating current commitments. To ensure satisfactory and fair outcomes for rural areas, people and communities, the RCPU needs to be pro-active and to be able to demonstrate that its advice to government is well-informed and genuinely independent. It must show that that it can provide the necessary advocacy, challenge and response to issues raised by rural communities rather than being seen as an arrangement for implementing Government policy. The ability to influence other government departments needs to be translated into tangible action for the benefit of rural communities, for example supporting pilot projects in rural areas as a means of informing policy and service innovation and identifying good practice. In developing its future priorities and initiatives, the RCPU should consult widely with, amongst others, local authorities, parish councils, local enterprise partnerships, the voluntary sector and most importantly with rural communities themselves.

10. The continuing emphasis on rural proofing is welcome but it needs to be more than just developing a new package of rural proofing materials. RCPU needs to be able to ensure the Government's commitment to rural proofing is carried through in practice and reflected in the ways in which policies are implemented on the ground. If, despite our concerns, the Government does go ahead with abolishing the CRC, we would urge that the independent review of rural proofing being explored, goes ahead as a matter of urgency.

2. Are there any further steps the RCPU should take to ensure it has up-to-date information, evidence and intelligence?

CEDOS/ADEPT Views

11. We welcome the evidence-based approach set out in the consultation document and the fact that the evidence will be publicly available. We welcome the intention for the RCPU to maintain and build on the strong evidence base developed by both Defra and the CRC to inform the Unit's priorities and its policy-influencing function. However, Government must ensure that it is confident that the RCPU will have the real capacity to be able to retain and follow through the level of work undertaken by the CRC.

12. A great deal of data and evidence is already available about the state of rural areas and the Unit will be well placed to access information at the national level and through the Rural Community Action Network and the new Rural Farming Networks. However, RCPU will need to ensure that it is able to establish and sustain effective two-way communications with a wide range of rural interests and channels – examples include the Leader Local Action Groups, local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships and the Rural Growth Network. The RCPU's evidence base must make full use of available local information sources, including importantly local economic assessments. As the consultation document makes clear, there will need to be access to a rich and varied intelligence, influence and evidence from those who live and work in rural areas.

13. Above all, the RCPU will need to develop ways of communicating effectively with rural communities. As part of this, it will need go out and talk to the communities themselves. As one of our members has said "the RCPU needs to recognise the importance of listening and particularly listening to the voice of the less articulate. The CRC has been very good at going to rural communities and listening to what they had to say. Not only did it mean that it had first-hand knowledge of rural issues but also that rural people felt that there was an organisation championing their needs".

3. Do you agree that the Commission for Rural Communities should be abolished?

CEDOS/ADEPT Views

14. Although the Government's preference is to abolish the CRC, we welcome its open minded approach and its preparedness to consider the option of retaining the Commission for Rural Communities in its current streamlined form whereby it continues to deliver its statutory functions and works independently and alongside Defra's RCPU in a critical friend capacity.

15. Having taken soundings from our members, we believe there will be real benefit in retaining the CRC to continue its statutory functions of advice, advocacy and watchdog, with its particular focus on rural disadvantage and economic underperformance, a focus which the consultation document acknowledges.

16. We recognise the need for the Government to continue to pursue a deficit reduction programme. The impact assessment acknowledges that the CRC has implemented a streamlined operating model which means it is able to fulfil its statutory functions at significantly reduced cost. It accepts that abolishing the CRC will deliver only modest savings. Despite this, it states that Government does not wish to fund an arm's length body to act as an expert adviser, advocate and watchdog on behalf of rural communities. For our part, particularly given the relatively modest savings involved, we believe that the removal of the Commission for Rural Communities as an independent voice for rural areas is too great a price to pay.

4. Do the proposals have any direct impact on you (if so, please explain their impact, including any supporting evidence)?

CEDOS/ADEPT Views

17. Many of our member authorities have substantial rural areas, including the most peripheral rural communities and disadvantaged rural areas in England. Government policies and the extent to which they recognise the particular needs and circumstances of rural areas clearly affect local authority service delivery and the ability to address local issues and support rural growth and competitiveness. In this context, if the proposed abolition of the Commission for Rural Communities is carried through, we consider the loss of an independent adviser; advocate and watchdog could have a direct adverse impact in many areas.