

MAINSTREAMING

policy for rural England

Minister for rural affairs
Dan Norris looks at what steps are being taken to ensure the interests of nine million country-dwellers are fully considered in all government programmes

Last summer I was very happy to accept the role of rural affairs minister, having lived and worked in Somerset for most of my life, and representing the semi-rural constituency of Wansdyke since 1997.

Like any new minister, I want to make a difference. On arriving in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), I began by asking myself two basic and important questions: how can the government do an even better job for rural communities and, as a minister, what can I do to make this happen?

Rural areas are important, they make up more than 80 per cent of the area of England, and are home to 20 per cent of the population. They provide natural resources, much of our food and water, environmental and biodiversity benefits, they offer recreation, and are important economically. They need and deserve to be properly valued by us all.

There are huge advantages to living in the country, including beautiful landscapes, peace and quiet and cleaner air. Many city dwellers long to move to the countryside. But rural communities are more dispersed, with people living many miles from the services they need, such as supermarkets, banks and hospitals. Facilities that many urban dwellers increasingly take for granted – mobile phone reception, fast broadband connections – can also be frustratingly absent.

Statistics show that rural people are, by and large, healthier, wealthier, better educated, happier and less likely to experience crime than those in cities. But the statistics also highlight pockets of rural deprivation, that housing costs are higher, and that average wages are lower.

We know from research as well as common sense that rural people want what everyone wants – a pleasant local environment, a decent home, good schools, and services that meet their needs. The government has committed itself, in the Rural White Paper 2000 and again in the Rural Strategy from 2004, to providing fair access to these.

Of course core services such as health, education and transport are provided by departments other than Defra. So Defra works with partners at all levels across government to help ensure that the needs and interests of the nine million rural people in England are fully reflected in all government policies and programmes. We call this “rural mainstreaming” – making sure that rural people’s interests are fully taken into account, so that a fair and equitable level of services is delivered. My job as rural minister is

to ensure that this happens effectively.

Building on the work of my predecessors and working with the Commission for Rural Communities, I have introduced two new initiatives: a series of Rural Champion placements for officials in key government departments and bodies; and a series of meetings with ministers from other government departments to discuss rural needs.

The Rural Champion placements in the Department of Energy and Climate Change, the Department for Transport and the Government Office for the East of England are already bear-



Rural people want what everyone wants

ing fruit and over the next few months will result in advice and suggestions to the host organisations together with a lessons-learned report which will be disseminated more widely.

My meetings with ministerial colleagues in other departments have also been very productive, resulting in renewed agreements and commitments on integrating rural issues across government.

Of course good progress was already being made. For example, with the regional development agencies on ensuring that the rural impacts of the recession are being addressed;

with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills on ensuring that rural communities are not overlooked in the roll-out of high speed broadband; and with the Department for Communities and Local Government on ensuring that the challenges of providing affordable rural housing are addressed in national housing and planning policies.

The ministerial meetings I’ve called with my colleagues in other departments have given added impetus to these activities and identified new areas where real progress can be achieved, such as providing support for rural services in new bus subsidy arrangements; enabling rural householders to benefit from new carbon reduction schemes; and ensuring that work to promote the English tourism industry rightly includes realising the full potential of England’s rural scenery and heritage.

So, what else have I learned in the past six months? I have become convinced that national-level policies and programmes do not provide the whole answer. Rural communities often come up with their own highly innovative solutions to problems.

Among the numerous examples of this is the Radstock Cooperative Society’s local convenience stores; Gloucestershire’s Village Agents scheme, providing older people in rural communities with easier access to information and services; and, in the sparsely populated Cumbrian parish of Alston Moor, community cooperative Cybermoor Ltd has ensured that most homes have high-speed broadband.

National government, regional agencies and local authorities all have a part to play in serving rural communities, but we must also recognise and encourage the capacity of those communities to help themselves.



INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS: children make their way to a village school in a “walking bus” scheme
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