

Rural Services APPG

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services
7th July 2021 at 10am
On-line via Zoom

RURAL PROOFING REPORT 2020

Discussion on the Rural Proofing Report 2020 published by DEFRA.

PRESENT (Invited Guest)

Lord Benyon (Minister for DEFRA)

MEMBERS

Rt Hon Philip Dunne MP (Ludlow) CHAIR

Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP (North Shropshire)

Lord Best

Lord Ewen Cameron of Dillington

Lord Rupert Carrington

Lord James Crathorne KCVO

Lord Don Curry

Bishop Christine (Newcastle)

Tim Abington (Office of Rob Butler MP)

Jonny Haseldine (Office of Anne Marie Morris MP)

Arthur Virgo (Office of Rt Hon Philip Dunne MP)

OBSERVERS

Steve Dowling (Public Affairs Manager, ACS)

Tim Goodship (Head of Rural Policy, DEFRA)

Sarah Lee (Head of Policy, Countryside Alliance)

Roy Payne (Stakeholder Engagement Lead, DEFRA)

In attendance from Secretariat

Bethan Aldridge (RSN)

Kerry Booth (RSN)

Graham Biggs MBE (RSN)

David Inman (RSN)

1. Apologies for Absence

Rob Butler MP (Aylesbury)

Guy Opperman MP (Hexham)

Greg Smith MP (Buckingham)

Tom Tugendhat MP (Tonbridge & Malling)

Bishop Alan (St Albans)

Daniel Carey-Dawes (Head of Rural Economy and Communities, CPRE)

Chris Hinchliff (Rural Economy and Communities Policy & Campaigns Officer, CPRE)

2. Notes of Previous Meeting

National Bus Strategy: 26th April 2021 and Associated Papers (please see link below)

<https://rsnonline.org.uk/images/APPG/minutes/26.04.21/minutes.pdf>

Notes of the Meeting were not discussed and will be brought forward to the next meeting.

3. Discussion on the Rural Proofing Report 2020

Invited Guest: Lord Benyon (Minister for DEFRA)

(see link to [Response](#) by Rural Coalition on the Rural Proofing Report 2020)

The Chair welcomed the Minister to the meeting and thanked him for picking up the invitation that had been extended to his predecessor, Lord Gardiner. The Chair explained that the APPG group on Rural Services takes an interest in the rural aspects of government policy and also the lack of recognition of rural consequences of government policy.

Lord Benyon thanked the Chair for the invitation and noted that he was keen to share the work that is being done currently in the department, what is planned for the future and to hear the views of the group and work in partnership to get it right. Lord Benyon confirmed that the department committed to the House of Lords Select Committee to publish annual reports on how the government is doing rural proofing. "Rural proofing is the key to getting rural issues addressed across government." The first report has been published and work is underway on the next report.

The Minister recognised that "as a rural practitioner, I know that it's something that very often is talked to at a governmental level, but not really effective in how people exist in their rural communities. We don't expect the same outcomes in rural areas but we do expect the conditions of rurality to have been taken into account in how we craft policy. And what works in an urban area may not work in a rural one".

The first report set out the Government's manifesto for the countryside and identified five key priority areas:

- Digital connectivity; Rural crime; Leveling Up and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund; Housing and planning; Access to the countryside.

The Minister informed the group that on **digital connectivity**, the government is committed to Project Gigabit and has allocated £5bn. The reality is that rural communities will have World Class connectivity at the same time as the rest of the country and that half-a-million rural homes and businesses have already been connected.

On **Rural crime** the government is looking at animal welfare and legislation on hare coursing which can lead on to further speculative rural crime.

On **Levelling Up**, there is an ambitious agenda of investing in our rural and coastal areas and giving them more control over how that investment is made. The Minister stated that the government is keen that the Leveling Up White Paper reflects the rural challenges. The effect of rurality compounds problems and the Minister wants to make sure that we are addressing those people in these communities for whom their location can multiply the impacts of the form of deprivation that they suffer. The **UK Shared Prosperity Fund** is a successor to the EU Structural Fund, and it needs to be accessible to benefit rural communities. Defra is working with MHCLG to achieve this and the Heads of Terms were published in the last spending review in November 2020 explicitly mentioning rural communities amongst their target groups. It is important that rural deprivation is understood as being different from urban deprivation because it is more dispersed.

Re **Housing and planning**, the Minister agreed that there should be adequate, affordable housing for those who work in rural areas providing vital services for the community, or employed in sectors such as agriculture, and tourism, which shape our rural areas. The Minister stressed that he wants to work with others to provide what people need, and that their families will want to continue to want to live in these communities.

The Minister also noted that he is a keen supporter of Village Halls and wants to support these to create community hubs. Lord Benyon informed the Group that the Department for Transport is working on a future mobility strategy for rural areas and linking it with health so that our older population in rural areas have greater access to services. The Minister is talking to other ministers to work actively with them and there is a great opportunity over the next year or two, to ensure that rural community needs are built into key policy areas.

The Chair agreed that it was very welcome that DEFRA was now under an obligation to produce an annual report on Rural Proofing. He hoped that the next report would be a current snapshot of what had been achieved and where we want to go in the year ahead and the Minister agreed. Tim Goodship confirmed that the next report will be focused on the five priorities outlined by Lord Benyon, which in turn will provide a framework for actions going forward.

The Chair also welcomed the engagement with other ministers and wondered if each department could demonstrate what they are doing across their remit, which may in turn add a bit of pressure to take actions which may go beyond the five priorities. The Minister thought

the five priorities covered a wide breadth of concerns and he has already had meetings on rural connectivity.

Lord Cameron noted that throughout his work on rural proofing, people in other departments simply do not understand rurality. They do not know what they are supposed to be looking for and it is therefore important to promote more training for departments. Lord Benyon agreed the importance of having a supporter on rurality in other Departments and he believed that the Treasury currently offered a key opportunity as several ministers represent extremely rural constituencies. With the new intake of MPs, there is a push from the backbenches, some in senior levels and government to make this happen. Tim Goodship confirmed that DEFRA was writing to all departments to clarify expectations for the next annual report. Also, DEFRA is tailoring its guidance for different audiences eg policy makers, economists re impact assessments etc. and considering interactive materials to promote awareness of rural issues in other departments.

The Chair offered the APPG support to engage cross party if this would be of help. Lord Benyon confirmed that the Chief Secretary is very interested in connecting people with nature and the countryside, and wider implications of tourism, health and well-being and that he hoped something would come from this and he will report back to the APPG on it.

Lord Curry queried how the UK Shared Prosperity Fund would be managed and if there would be an element of “return on investment” in allocating funds to rural projects. Lord Curry was concerned that rural projects will not deliver the same potential return on investment as urban but that often there is an important social element which is not monitored and difficult to calculate. Could the Minister try to ensure that rural projects are given a fair chance of support? Lord Benyon agreed to have a discussion re the value for money calculations in terms of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. Tim Goodship confirmed there are four areas to focus on: allocation methodology (between different parts of the UK); investment priorities; service delivery mechanism (how services work at very localised level); and metrics (how to judge success in rural settings). The Chair commented that the allocation methodology used for the Levelling Up fund to local authorities to divide by constituency had been commendable and recommended it. As an MP, the Chair felt that he had influence over the allocation of meaningful spend which would not normally be available under any of the other metrics due to sparse population of his constituency.

Lord Curry’s other query was in regard to local employer groups and ensuring that rural businesses/interests are represented on them as he felt that issues like this are difficult for other departments to notice but could have a significant influence on rural areas. The Minister said that he would take this away to discuss with officials. He was open to advice and had long thought that rural SMEs are not good at getting themselves represented in more local/regional policy making areas or finance delivery organisations such as LEPs. He noted that local employers’ groups or similar are busy people, running their own businesses but that we had to get better at encouraging them to come forward.

Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP reiterated Lord Cameron’s comment on the lack of understanding in government departments on the impact of “urban” policies in rural areas. He recommended seconding people from rural organisations eg NFU, Tenant Farmers

Association, Shropshire and Somerset Councils etc as SPADs to get the rural view across. The Minister agreed about having special advisors who have done similar rural roles joining government departments. He stated that he was happy to continue the conversation and expand ideas on how to make sure decision makers understand the problems.

Bishop Christine wished to raise the question of market investment in broadband. This has always been an issue in Northumberland but the pandemic has worsened the degree of exclusion to digital data as more things go on-line eg health. How do we include rural areas when the cost of connecting a building can range from £38.5K to £125K and the return on investment will take decades? The Minister noted that the Universal Service Obligation has been a major step forward, but we have to fill the gaps as highlighted by the Bishop. The government is investing £1Bn into the Shared Rural Network which will increase the UK's 4G geographic coverage of 95% by the end of 2025 but the Minister is mindful that we need to do better with some of the most rural connections. The Chair agreed that this does offer real hope for connectivity to rural areas and in his constituency the FTTP offer is for hundreds of megabits which will greatly help.

Lord Best asked about the path to net zero decarbonization and achieving this in rural areas where people are not on the mains gas supply. He noted that is not easy to find suitable alternatives and the properties themselves are problematic to convert. He fears that rural areas will be in greater difficulty and fuel poverty is already a big issue where incomes are lower, and costs of fuel are much higher. The Minister noted that, because of a recent role he held, he was very aware of net zero decarbonization route and the impact of retrofitting properties in a rural area. The government was looking at different boilers, different sources of heating, training the occupier on how to manage these new systems etc and that technology was going to be key here. Tim Goodship confirmed that another aspect to net zero is transport and the much greater reliance on cars in rural areas. The Department of Transport is looking at future mobility strategies, the challenges of electrification of vehicles, charging points, on-demand services etc. The Chair noted his concerns re the cost of converting off-gas grid homes, the push to do rural areas first as seen as an easy-to-access group, and that the government has not fully understood the costs or disruption of retrofit.

Graham Biggs asked the Minister to look at the government's response to the House of Lords' Select Committee on the Rural Economy and the call for a rural strategy. The government had promised an expanded rural vision, instead of a rural strategy, but as yet it has not been produced. It would seem the government position was that a rural proofing system would obviate the need for a strategy. Could the Minister say when the rural vision, crossing a range of services with desired outcomes, would be produced? The Minister said he would appreciate any help from Graham with some headline points to include as it was important to make sure it was focused on the problem and how people live. Tim Goodship confirmed that there would be a vision for rural communities and that the test ground will be in the next rural proofing annual report. The first report set out clear priority areas to focus on and the next report will show how we've delivered against those and the outcomes arisen from that action. The Minister agreed that he has a vision that he will articulate but would also like to work together on it, to make government function better, keeping it rooted in people's lives and real businesses and how communities exist.

The Chair thanked Lord Benyon for his time today, for answering all the questions put to him and that the meeting had been really helpful.

4. Date of Next Meeting

September 2021 (TBC – waiting for date to come from Minister's office)

Topic - Emergency Services Network rollout of mobile capacity.

Guest Speaker – Rt Hon Kit Malthouse MP (Minister for Policing & Fire Services)

Meeting finished at 11am.