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Consultation response

Ref: 0112

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

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The government is proposing to abolish the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC). The Public Bodies Bill requires the government to consult before abolishing public bodies. This consultation response covers the abolition of the CRC and the proposed transfer of functions to the Department for Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

The CRC has three key functions on rural issues: to provide advocacy; to be an expert adviser; and to be an independent watchdog. The government believes there is some duplication in these functions with the role of Defra and has already transferred some of CRC's roles into a Rural Communities Policy Unit (RCPU) within Defra.

Age UK recommendations:

- The outcomes the RCPU has to deliver should include the following issues:
 - Rural areas are ageing quicker than urban areas, which means the needs of older people should be a priority in rural proofing policy and services.
 - The decisions made by all levels of government to fund services in rural areas cannot be based simply on cost and the number of people using the service; rather a broader impact assessment, taking into account social impact, needs to be undertaken.
 - Building capacity in communities will require initial and sustained investment in existing and new voluntary and community organisations to give people the ability to take on new roles e.g. supporting, creating or managing volunteering, social enterprises, etc.
 - There needs to be guidance for communities to understand their rights (e.g. the banking code requires banks to consult on closures) and help them make decisions about the best models for new service delivery (e.g. the range of community broadband services).
 - The RCPU should commit to implementing the findings of CRC's research into older people's services and social isolation in rural areas.
- There should be an opportunity for older people's views on rural issues to be directly heard by central Government.
- There needs to be reassurance that Defra will be in a position to hold other government departments and local authorities to account to make sure they deliver improvements in rural communities.

Question 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, business and communities?

The government has set out three main initiatives for the RCPU:

- The development of measures to be set out in Rural Economy Growth Review.
- A proposed Government-wide Rural Statement.
- A new package of rural proofing materials, including a clearer definition of rural proofing, a robust restatement of the Government's commitment to it, advice and guidance to policy-makers.

Rural proofing

Age UK believes the three initiatives set out above will provide a foundation for the work of the new unit. In particular, all policy from all levels of government that may have an impact on rural areas needs to be rural proofed.

All levels of government need advice and guidance to understand the distinct approaches rural communities may need for the provision of both public and commercial services. Furthermore, recognising that rural areas are ageing quicker than urban areas, the needs of older people should be a priority in the process of rural proofing.

The median age of rural areas is already higher at 44.4 years (compared to 38.5 in urban areas) and some sparsely populated and remote areas have 60 to 74 year olds as the main population groupⁱ. Demographic change in these areas over the next twenty years will see this trend continue.

There is evidence that where policy has not been developed from a rural perspective it has either had little impact or exacerbated problems in rural areas for older people. For instance, measures to tackle fuel poverty that have primarily funded cavity and loft insulation, led to a lack of funding for measures to upgrade solid wall and off gas properties, which are predominantly seen in rural areasⁱⁱ.

There is a concern that some local authorities are not preparing for an ageing populationⁱⁱⁱ and in some cases not responding to the needs of their rural areas. The government's localism agenda promotes more local control over decisions, which should lead to a more tailored response for citizens. The government needs to maintain pressure on local authorities to incorporate rural and ageing proofing into their decisions.

In addition, services in rural areas are at greater risk unless the 'Rural Premium' is taken into account in the assessment of service provision. The rural premium is the extra cost of delivery of services to people living in a rural area, compared to those who live in an urban area. Therefore, the decision to fund services in rural areas cannot be based simply on cost and the number of people using the service; rather a broader impact assessment, taking into account social impact, needs to be undertaken. This is crucial over the next couple of years as spending both nationally and locally will be under increased pressure.

Community action

The consultation document also mentions the ongoing investment by Defra in community action, which will support the rural 'Big Society' and long term sustainability of rural communities. This should be a major priority for the RCPU. There is a community spirit in rural communities that puts them in an ideal position to take on the government's new principle of localism. However, it cannot be assumed that it will continue to thrive unsupported. The right framework is needed so that everyone has an opportunity to play their part.

Older people are already more likely than younger generations to be involved in some form of volunteering and civic society. Nonetheless, it needs to be recognised

that building capacity in communities will require initial and sustained investment in existing and new voluntary and community organisations to give people the ability to take on new roles e.g. supporting, creating or managing volunteering, social enterprises, etc.

The RCPU has a role in providing this guidance and continuing to research and share knowledge about ways to deliver rural services, such as transport or broadband, in rural areas. There needs to be guidance for communities to understand their rights (e.g. the banking code requires banks to consult on closures) and help them make decisions about the best models for new service delivery (e.g. the range of community broadband services).

Social isolation

The consultation document did not refer to the ongoing work of the CRC over the past year. One of the main projects was research into the social isolation experienced by older people living in rural areas. The aim of the project is to provide recommendations to Government and other bodies about the services provided to socially isolated older people.

The RCPU should commit to implementing the findings of CRC's research. There needs to be continued investment and roll out of targeted approaches to social isolation in rural areas.

Deprivation and isolation in rural areas can be masked due to the disparity in different households' financial and social positions. On average, rural areas are seen to be performing well on economic indicators, have high educational attainment and people enjoy a healthier lifestyle. Yet this hides inequalities within well-performing rural communities and the striking disparities between them. For instance, there is a connection between the accessibility of rural areas and the affluence of older people living there, with the most accessible seeing the most affluent and those in remote areas worst off^{iv}.

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

The government is proposing to develop new ways of creating two-way communication with rural stakeholders. In the consultation this focuses on the new Rural and Farming Network, which aims to bring together the farming and food sectors and from those representing broader community, environmental and business interests within their localities.

Age UK believes there should be an opportunity for older people's views on rural issues to be directly heard by central Government. This would provide up to date information and intelligence on the implications of ageing in rural areas. Defra and DWP have previously co-ordinated the Rural Ageing Consultative Group, which brought together representative older people from the UK Advisory Forum on Ageing and organisations such as Age UK. A group such as this with timely meetings and a

clear purpose would make sure rural policy decisions recognise the experience of older people in rural areas.

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

Question 4. Do the proposals have any direct impact on you?

This will have an indirect impact on Age UK.

CRC provided an important expert and advocacy role, in particular by providing thorough research and analysis into rural issues. From the current proposals the government will be able to continue this role through the initiatives of the RCPU.

However, it is unclear what the implications of the abolition of the CRC will be on their function as an independent watchdog. There needs to be reassurance that Defra will be in a position to hold other government departments and local authorities to account to make sure they deliver improvements in rural communities.

ⁱ Commission for Rural Communities, *State of the Countryside Report*, 2010

ⁱⁱ Rural Services Network, *Understanding the impact of real depth and impact of fuel poverty in rural England*, 2010

ⁱⁱⁱ Audit Commission, *Under Pressure – tackling the financial challenges of an ageing population*, 2010

^{iv} Commission for Rural Communities & Age Concern, *The Ageing Countryside*, 2006