

UK Rural Policy & Practitioners Group

A QUICK COMPARISON OF RURAL POLICY PRIORITIES ACROSS THE UNITED KINGDOM

The exploratory meeting on 16th May 2011 between organisations interested in forming a UK Rural Policy & Practitioners Group agreed it would be useful to identify the degree of overlap between Government rural policy priorities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This could help to focus the early work of the Group.

England

The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra), through its new Rural Communities Policy Unit, is planning to publish a Ministerial Rural Policy Statement in July 2011. Ahead of that Defra had initially stated four priorities for rural policy which were:

- Working to deliver universal access to *broadband*;
- Helping those in remote areas with the *cost of fuel* (including fuel poverty);
- Tackling the shortage of *affordable housing*; and
- Enabling *access to services*, including transport options. One Defra communication named shops, post offices, pubs and petrol stations.

More recent Defra communication indicates the priorities have grown to six, adding: sustainable rural *economic development*; and particular help for *upland* areas.

Defra also say they will champion the interests of rural people when policy decisions are being taken by other Government Departments. They no longer use the phrase 'rural proofing', but this would seem to be its equivalent.

Scotland

The Scottish Government has a Rural & Environment Directorate. In early May 2011 it published '*Our Rural Future*', as its formal response to a consultation process. This includes priorities under five headings:

- *Infrastructure* – covering access to broadband; space for affordable housing; and co-ordinated public transport;
- *Land use* – covering rural (land use) partnerships; and the generation of public benefits;
- *Community participation* – covering co-operation with planners and land managers; involvement in public policies; involvement in community growth; and involvement in renewable energy development;

- *Community enterprise* – covering some of the above; plus ownership/management of local assets; delivering more rural services; better access to public sector procurement; and the growth of development trusts;
- *Business and skills* – covering some of the above; plus businesses adding greater value; and more joint-marketing between tourism and other businesses.

Although not in this document, the Scottish Executive website continues to note its commitment to ensure the mainstreaming of rural community needs across its work.

Wales

The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) has a Department for Rural Affairs. There is no specific rural policy statement or document. Most of the aims and priorities listed on the website relate to farming, fisheries, food production and forestry. Those that do not are:

- Helping all WAG departments to take *account of rural needs*;
- Delivering the *Rural Development Plan* for Wales (which covers agriculture, the environment, quality of life and local development);
- Providing support for local *community development* in rural areas;
- Meeting the needs of *deep rural areas* (which appears to emphasise access to services); and
- Contributing to action on *climate change*.

The first of those listed above once again implies that rural mainstreaming is an important policy feature.

Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Executive has a Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). It has a goal of developing the social and economic infrastructure of rural areas. DARD is currently consulting on an action plan to deliver its Rural White Paper. The five key policy priorities set out within that document are:

- *Urban-rural linkages* – with efficient transport and infrastructure systems;
- *Access to services* – promoting fair and equitable access to key services;
- *Sustainable rural communities* – promoting inclusion and tolerance; minimising poverty and disadvantage; maintaining viable economic and social infrastructure; preserving social and cultural uniqueness; promoting effective governance with engaged communities; and maximising community gain from the RDP;
- *Sustainable rural economies* – providing appropriate rural business support; and maximising employment opportunities;

- *Sustainable countryside* – safeguarding its beauty for all to enjoy; and promoting a more sustainable agriculture and competitive agri-food sector with enhanced environmental links.

There has also been a Rural Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Framework. Its status is a little unclear from the website, but it appears to be being extended. That focuses on five areas:

- Rural fuel poverty;
- Rural transport;
- Rural community development;
- Rural childcare; and
- Delivering a Rural Challenge programme.

Over the years Northern Ireland has developed the most sophisticated approach to rural proofing in the UK and it is clear from the website that this still forms a main plank of its rural policy.

Commentary

A comparison of policy priorities is not simple because the different countries take different approaches to rural policy. In particular, those in Wales are less topic-specific. Some relate to the delivery of programmes, not least the Rural Development Programme.

Those outside England are much more explicit about the role of rural community development and community action. That said, given the cross-Government emphasis on localism and the Big Society in Whitehall, it seems likely these themes will in practice underpin the approach taken in the forthcoming Defra Rural Policy Statement.

It could be said that the recent Defra interest in upland rural communities inherently applies to Scotland and Wales; that much of the rural parts of those countries are upland.

Access to services and transport are arguably the most common of the priorities. It is notable that outside England, affordable housing is only given explicit emphasis in Scotland.

The initial focus of the UK Rural Policy & Practitioners Group might, therefore, want to add community development to the (likely) six Defra rural priorities.

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