

9 March 2005

Commission for Rural Communities – tackling rural disadvantage

Clear evidence of the complex distribution of disadvantage in rural areas is published today (9 March) at the launch of the Countryside Agency's Commission for Rural Communities¹. The Commission starts work next month, in a shake-up of rural delivery arrangements following the Government's recent Rural Strategy², with a clear remit "to make sure the rural voice is heard – and listened to – at all levels of policymaking."

Providing well-informed, independent advice to government and others, the Commission will help to ensure that policies and delivery reflect the needs of people living and working in rural England, with a particular focus on tackling disadvantage. It will have three key functions, as rural advocate, expert adviser and independent watchdog.

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Margaret Beckett, said: "The creation of the Commission for Rural Communities gives rural people – especially the disadvantaged – a strong voice to ensure that policies deliver for them, their communities and their businesses."

Dr Stuart Burgess, chairman of the Countryside Agency, said: "Tackling rural disadvantage is right at the top of the Commission's agenda, but success depends upon sound evidence about the needs, and the policies and solutions that work.

"New research³ published today confirms that those who are living on low incomes in urban areas are clustered together, whereas they are mostly scattered across rural England. Helping these people access jobs, healthcare and other vital services poses a real challenge.

"The complexity of rural disadvantage can now be identified at a very local level, showing that in rural Suffolk, for example, there are small pockets or small areas of lower income households living cheek by jowl with affluent households. This means that measuring disadvantage over too large an area overlooks these pockets and makes rural poverty difficult to address through area-based schemes.

"But even in rural areas it varies, with proportionally higher levels of economic disadvantage in some rural areas than others, so one approach does not fit all. For example, in England there are more people on low incomes in the south west, the north east, around the Wash, and in rural areas of South Yorkshire, Derbyshire and North Nottinghamshire.

"Today's report gives a brief overview of the current evidence available, but it is clear there remain gaps and weaknesses in the evidence base. We need to know more and to bring in fresh ideas and thinking for the future. We are looking to others to help us and, before starting work on the Commission's first major thematic study on rural disadvantage, we want to hear from policymakers and delivery bodies to make sure the study addresses the right issues and produces relevant outcomes," urged Dr Burgess.

To respond with your views, email disadvantagestudy@ruralcommunities.gov.uk or write to Lynn Watkins, Commission for Rural Communities, The Countryside Agency, Dacre House, 19 Dacre St, London SW1H 0DH, by Wednesday 20 April 2005.

Rural Disadvantage: our first thematic study Ref CRC 03 can be downloaded from www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/disadvantage or is available free from Countryside Agency Publications, PO Box 125, Wetherby, West Yorkshire LS23 7EP Tel: 0870 120 6466.

The Commission for Rural Communities is being established initially as a division of the Countryside Agency from 1 April 2005. A separate Landscape, Access and Recreation division

will work closely with English Nature and the Rural Development Service, moving towards a new integrated agency to be formed following primary legislation¹. The Agency's grant schemes are being transferred from 1 April to regional and local delivery bodies who will have prime responsibilities for socio-economic rural delivery in future.