



**November 2010**

## **Rural Experience legacy report**

### **1. Foreword**

The Rural Experience was the name we gave to a programme set up in 2008 to inspire senior people from government, business, public and voluntary sectors to make a positive contribution to rural communities. During the 18 months that the programme ran over 90 people took part including many chief executives and visits were organised on a wide variety of subjects ranging from affordable housing to community planning.

We created the programme to show how sharing best practice with those in positions of power and influence could help to meet the challenges facing rural communities. We also learnt a lot about the amazing determination, drive and creativity of rural people.

Following the announcement in June 2010 that the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) was to be abolished, we wanted to assess how successful the programme had been. The CRC went about this by approaching a cross section of those who had attended and asking for their feedback during August and September 2010. We were delighted that three leaders and 12 delegates gave us a reference, over three quarters of those we approached.

We did this to pass on any learning points to the new Rural Communities Policies Unit in the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and other interested bodies. This report therefore contains a range of testimonies who describe the Rural Experience in their own words and at the end we have attempted to summarise the main achievements from each visit.

We would like to thank all the people who have taken part in the programme and in particular those who have provided feedback and the people on the ground who helped to put on the visits. By sharing their knowledge and experience they have helped to make a real difference to the lives of many rural people.

### **2. Introduction**

The Rural Experience was set up at the beginning of 2009 to enable executives from the public, private and voluntary sector to experience what life is really like in the rural communities. The objective was to share that knowledge and insight with key decision makers who in turn could use their organisations, networks and influence to make a real difference to lives of rural people. From the outset the Rural Experience was designed as a collaborative project. This reflected the simple fact that the CRC as a small government body needed to work through others to achieve its objectives.

During the 18 months that the programme ran we put on six visits. These focussed on affordable homes run in co-operation with the Homes and Communities Agency, the rural economy run with the British Chamber of Commerce, high speed broadband run with the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, market towns run with The Government Office North West, renewable energy run with The Co-operative Group and community planning run with the Department of Communities and Local Government.

The numbers attending each visit varied but a typical Rural Experience visit was attended by a leader and 12 delegates. All the participants were recruited proactively, the leader because he or she was a high profile spokesperson in their field and the delegates because they were

influential in their subject.

All the delegates were given a tailored briefing, a one day intensive visit and a follow up action plan. On average it took three months to put on a visit from initially approaching the leader to following up with all the delegates.

The programme evolved from existing projects that the CRC had run, notably a project called 'Seeing is Believing'. It also drew inspiration from external ones, particularly the Prince's 'Business in the Community' initiative. However, the Rural Experience was created to 'add value' to the existing programmes that the Commission for Rural Communities were running and each visit was therefore unique.

The timing, leader, subject and location of each Rural Experience visit was as follows:

In January 2009 Sir Bob Kerslake, the Chief Executive of the Homes and Communities Agency led a visit on affordable housing in Essex.

In March 2009 David Frost, the Director General of the British Chamber of Commerce, led a visit on the rural economy in Warwickshire.

In April 2009 Hilary Benn MP, former Secretary of State at the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, led a visit on high speed broadband in Oxfordshire.

In July 2009 Liz Meek, the Director of the Government Office North West, led a visit on market towns in Cheshire.

In September 2009 Lynda Shillaw, formerly Managing Director of The Co-operative Estates, led a visit on renewable energy in Cambridgeshire.

In March 2010 Steve Quartermain, the Chief Planner with the Department of Communities and Local Government led a visit on community planning in Devon.

### **3. The views of the leaders**

To get the views of leaders we approached three of the six leaders and asked for their thoughts on the programme. These are the comments we received.

#### **3.1 The first Rural Experience on affordable housing held in Essex in January 2009**

The first Rural Experience was led by Sir Bob Kerslake, the former Chief Executive of the Homes and Communities Agency and now Permanent Secretary at the Department of Communities and Local Government. He led a delegation to look at affordable housing at a range of locations in Essex in January 2009.

*"The Rural Experience visit which I led on the subject of affordable housing was a good way of seeing best practice first hand. It provided an excellent opportunity to meet with a range of stakeholders connected with the delivery of rural housing and in particular to tackle specific aspects/themes on the ground. The delegate list was very impressive including the Chief Executives of Shelter, the East of England Development Agency, English Rural Housing Association, National Housing Federation, Council for the Protection of Rural England and Hastoe Housing Association as well as key stakeholders from house building and financial institutions. The visit provided an insight into the rural dimension to affordable housing and produced immediate results with a rural housing enabler appointed for the area."*

#### **3.2 Second Rural Experience on the rural economy held in Warwickshire in March 2009**

The second Rural Experience was led by David Frost, the Director General of the British Chambers of Commerce. He led a delegation to look at the affect of the recession on a wide

range of small rural businesses in the market town of Alcester in Warwickshire in March 2009.

*“Too often government agencies can be overly bureaucratic and remote from the people they are meant to serve. I was therefore very encouraged that the Commission for Rural Communities ‘Rural Experience’ programme was a very practical example of what an agency should be doing: bringing together the public, private and third sectors to find solutions to the challenges faced by business.*

*“The visit itself which I led focused on the affect of the recession on small and medium sized enterprises. It brought together over a dozen leaders, many chief executives, from a wide range of organisations including the British Banking Association, the Country and Landowners Association, the National Farmers Union and the Federation of Small Businesses as well as local and regional representatives from the British Chambers of Commerce.*

*“As a result of the Rural Experience all the delegates got a much better understanding of the many challenges facing rural businesses in these difficult economic times and representation was made to government and the banks about regulation, planning and lending. In the future the type of activity that the Rural Experience represents will be vital if we are to get in place the right package of support to ensure that rural businesses continue to make a major contribution to the British economy”.*

### **3.3 Final Rural Experience on community planning held in Devon in March 2010**

The final Rural Experience was led by Steve Quartermain, Chief Planner at the Department of Communities and Local Government. He led a delegation looking at community planning in and just outside Exmoor National Park in March 2010.

*“I think it is really important that policy thinking is influenced by practical experience of policy outcomes and the Rural Experience was a wonderful example of how key leaders in their field could look at planning outcomes and challenge their thinking on whether these were what was expected and whether they could change their thinking to good effect. At the end of the visit participants pledged to new actions and the experience had proven to be a catalyst for future action. It was a thoroughly enjoyable and rewarding event”.*

## **4. The views of the delegates**

Since 2009 over 90 senior executives have been through the programme from across public, private and voluntary sectors. To get the views of delegates we approached a cross section of those who had attended each visit. We received responses from those attending five visits on affordable housing, the rural economy, high speed broadband, market towns and community planning. These are some of the comments we received.

Lord Matthew Taylor is a former Liberal Democrat MP and is now the chairman of the National Housing Federation.

*“I believe the Rural Experience was an innovation that Defra should consider continuing to bring together stakeholders across departments, NDPBs, NGOs, Local Government and possibly private sector (e.g. housebuilders). Having for example Bob Kerslake hold the ring between villagers and Hastoe over the pros and cons of an affordable housing proposal (and a local builder unable to afford a home throw his views into the mix too) was great – especially with key policy formers standing there watching it play out! Key was bringing together a range of individuals involved, but rarely at the sharp end like this – or those potentially involved but not yet engaged. I really valued it, and would do it again”.*

Gideon Amos was formerly the Chief Executive of the Town and Country Planning Association and is now a Commissioner with Infrastructure Planning Commission.

*“Somewhat to my surprise having attended - and been involved in devising - numerous conferences and seminars, the Rural Experience visits were an excellent and genuine learning activity, drawing*

*in senior figures from across all sectors - government and non-government - in pursuit of understanding in a businesslike, inexpensive and unpretentious way. Whatever new directions public policy takes understanding rural development issues on the ground - literally speaking - must be crucial to anyone taking decisions in this area".*

Adrian Coles is the Chief Executive of The Building Societies Association.

*"Overall, I found the Rural Experience a powerfully informative and educational exercise. There were two reasons for this. First, the very wide range of well informed people of hugely differing backgrounds taking part in the Rural Experience, each with an important perspective on the issues that were the subject of the Experience. The opportunities for networking within the group gave each participant a wide ranging overview of the key issues.*

*"Second the opportunity for practical, on-the-ground, insights into these key issues was extremely helpful in enabling participants to understand some of the detailed concerns of rural communities, and us all to move on from big-picture conversation with fellow participants to granular appreciation of how these issues played out in practical terms in local communities."*

Shaun Spiers is the Chief Executive of the Campaign to Protect Rural England.

*" The event was very well-organised with a good range of participants. The issue in question is very contentious and the organisations involved and on different 'sides' sometimes seem to spend a lot of time avoiding speaking to each other. The Rural Experience was a good chance to develop a dialogue and for participants to get a better understanding of the positions of different organisations and individuals. It was particularly valuable to meet some individuals with direct experience of some of the challenges of providing appropriate housing in rural areas – those in housing need; villagers opposing a development; residents in a new affordable housing scheme; and workers with a Citizens' Advice Bureau in a market town. All in all, the Rural Experience was extremely valuable".*

Mark Webster is the head of finance at Nationwide Building Society.

*"The Rural Experience was an opportunity for me to see and appreciate some of the difficult issues facing rural communities first hand and examine these with a broad range of leaders in the business, public, voluntary and other sectors to generate ideas for potential solutions or offer future support. I thought that the event was innovative and the CRC successfully attracted an influential list of delegates to commit time to not only learning about the issues, but also engaging directly with people who are involved in managing the issues on a day to day basis".*

Andrew Clark is head of policy for the National Farmers Union.

*"I found the CRC organised Rural Experience field visit a valuable opportunity to hear first-hand experience from rural businesses that make business work in rural Warwickshire. .. I have been able to use this example in discussing farm diversification. I thought the area chosen was also good – rural Warwickshire is not a rural development priority area. We need first-hand experience of rural businesses outside the typical remote rural or urban fringe areas frequently visited".*

Adrian Gane is the Chief Executive of the Country Land and Business Association.

*"The CRC visit to Alcester was of particular benefit to all of us who were keen to learn at first hand the effects of national policy on the ground. We were very lucky to visit a range of very entrepreneurial businesses who explained how a range of issues (including bank lending, empty property rates and restrictive planning practices) had the potential to impact them. A very worthwhile day for us all".*

Peter Couchman is the Chief Executive of the Plunkett Foundation.

*"The Rural Experience offered three very valuable benefits to me. Firstly, it was an opportunity to visit and learn from enterprises outside of my usual area of expertise. I devote a fair amount of time*

*to visiting enterprises we support, so it was good to look beyond that group. Secondly, the discussion on the issues with such a broad range of interests was highly valuable. Finally, spending time with such a range of organisations helped to build links and has already led to a number of other meetings and activities. The Rural Experience was, to me, an example of CRC at its best where it acted as a catalyst for change by linking people and thinking together in ways which might not have happened otherwise”.*

Ann Skippers is the President of the Royal Town and Country Planning Institute.

*“The Rural Experience was very useful for a number of reasons. By encouraging participants out of their offices it allowed us to focus on rural issues. There really is no substitute for visiting projects such as the Doctors Surgery in Dulverton and Cutcombe Market and hearing first-hand about the issues facing, and impacts such projects have on, rural communities. The Experience was a useful reminder of the issues facing rural communities and really opened my eyes to the need to take a different approach and raise awareness amongst our respective professions. Each of the participants went away having agreed to take further ideas and positive action back to their respective organisations together with ... a greater will to keep the very specific and different needs of rural communities high on the agenda and at the forefront of their work.”*

## **5. Achievements**

Following the visit an assessment was made of each Rural Experience visit. This is a summary of what each visit achieved.

### **5.1 The first Rural Experience on affordable housing held in Essex in January 2009**

The first Rural Experience on affordable housing led by Sir Bob Kerslake in January 2009 was his first rural visit as Chief Executive of the Homes and Communities (HCA). It attracted a range of senior executives from across the housing sector including chief executives from Shelter, East of England Development Agency, Council for the Protection of Rural England, The National Housing Federation, and the English Rural Housing Association. As a direct result of the visit a contested housing application which the delegates visited eventually went ahead with local support and a rural housing enabler appointed for the area.

At that time, the visit also helped to influence the work and grants available from the HCA. Following the visit the HCA adopted a target of building 10,300 homes between 2008/11 and in April 2009 announced a rural affordable housing project building homes in rural areas with a population of less than 3000. This was followed in February 2010 by the announcement of a £1 million rural masterplanning fund.

### **5.2 Second Rural Experience on the rural economy held in Warwickshire in March 2009**

The second Rural Experience on the rural economy led by David Frost in March 2009 attracted a wide range of senior executives including representatives from the British Bankers Association, Country Land and Business Association, National Farmers Union and the Federation of Small Businesses. It was held at the height of the recession and gave an important insight into how difficult conditions had become for local business people.

As a result of the visit the British Chambers of Commerce made representation to the government on the need for greater support for rural businesses and to the banks on the need to lending more. The local chamber of commerce, Coventry and Warwickshire and the Regional Development Agency, Advantage West Midlands also followed on a number of issues raised by businesses on the day on regulation, planning and lending.

### **5.3 Third Rural Experience on high speed broadband held in Warwickshire in April 2009**

The third Rural Experience on high speed broadband led by Hilary Benn MP, the Secretary of

State at Defra, in March 2009 attracted senior representatives from Orange, Cybermoor Community Broadband and Ruralnet. The Secretary of State led a useful discussion with delegates about the main issues facing businesses in rural areas including slow speeds and limited download capacity.

#### **5.4 Fourth Rural Experience on market towns held in Cheshire in July 2009**

The fourth Rural Experience on market towns led by Liz Meek, Director of the Government Office North West attracted delegates from Cheshire East Council, the Cheshire Constabulary, North West Development Agency, Action for Market Towns and the North West Rural Affairs Forum. The visit explored issues around the changing face of the high street including the decline of independent retailers, the increase in charity shops and the impact of supermarkets as well as business rates, VAT and insurance premiums.

All the action points emanating from the visit were taken forward by Cheshire East Council at a conference on the future of market towns in the county. The council were also so impressed with the Rural Experience model that they repeated the exercise in other market towns.

#### **5.5 Fifth Rural Experience on renewable energy held in Cambridgeshire in September 2009**

The fifth Rural Experience on renewable energy led by Lynda Shillaw, the managing director of Co-operative Group Estates, in September 2009 attracted a wide range of representatives from the Department of Energy and Climate Change, the Church Commissioners, Renewable Energy Foundation, East of England Rural Affairs Forum, Scottish Power Renewables, Energy4all, British Wind Energy Association and the Centre for Sustainable Energy.

It comprised two events, a seminar in London and a site visit to the Cambridgeshire Fens, both designed to highlight the importance of delivering renewable energy in rural communities.

A resulting joint report from the CRC and the Co-operative Group entitled 'Delivering renewable energy in rural communities' listed 10 key recommendations covering planning, information, funding and community engagement. The report fed into a government consultation on feed in tariffs and helped to establish the principle of paying communities and individuals for producing their own renewable energy.

#### **5.6 Final Rural Experience on community planning held in Devon in March 2010**

The final Rural Experience on community planning led by Steve Quartermain, the Chief Planner at the department of Communities and Local Government, in March 2010 attracted the biggest delegation of any visit including senior representatives from the Town and Country Planning Association, Planning Inspectorate, Royal Town Planning Institute and the National Planning Forum. The visit explored the importance of community entrepreneurs and the need for flexibility within the planning system.

As a result of the visit the Planning Inspectorate incorporated rural planning into its training programme for inspectors, the National Planning Forum discussed rural planning for the first time and the Royal Town and County Planning established a rural forum for exchanging best practice.