

# RURAL DELIVERY REVIEW

A report on the delivery of government policies in rural England

Christopher Haskins

October 2003

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PART 1

# Introduction and background

# Introduction and summary

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## Background to the review

I was invited to look at the arrangements for delivering the government's rural policies in England because it was clear to Ministers that they needed to be reviewed following the creation of Defra as the new rural affairs department in Whitehall. The complex delivery mechanisms that exist are the collective legacy of many past governments and of changing priorities. Most people accept that changes need to take place to meet the ambitious and growing rural agenda that the government faces in the years to come.

## Terms of reference

My terms of reference are to make recommendations on how best to improve the effectiveness of delivery arrangements for Defra's rural policies with a view to:

- simplifying or rationalising existing delivery mechanisms and establishing clear roles and responsibilities and effective co-ordination;
- achieving efficiency savings and maximising value for money;
- providing better, more streamlined services with a more unified, transparent and convenient interface with end customers;
- identifying arrangements that can help to deliver Defra's rural priorities and Public Service Agreement targets cost-effectively.

The full terms, in **Annex 9** of this report, specify organisations and developments that are directly relevant to my study. They exclude areas of rural delivery in which Defra has recently instigated reviews or reform. With these exceptions, I have concentrated my attention on the activities of those organisations that act directly on behalf of Defra in the delivery of rural policy.

In the eight months spanned by this review I have examined how the various organisations listed in my terms of reference work collectively as part of an overall system of delivery and have drawn conclusions about their respective contributions.

Recognising that much of the responsibility for rural delivery lies with 'mainstream' public service organisations funded by Whitehall departments other than Defra (such as Health and Transport), I have also examined the relationship between Defra and these other bodies in the context of rural delivery. While I have been able to draw general conclusions from this part of my analysis, the timescale and scope of this review have not permitted an in-depth study of the rural dimension of mainstream service delivery. I nonetheless believe that many of the detailed lessons learned from my examination of Defra and its rural delivery agents are applicable across the broader spectrum of rural service delivery.

## Gathering the facts

In total, around 350 organisations, authorities and groups (including various regional or local branches and offices) have contributed to this review. I have, in addition, received comments and views from nearly 300 individual customers of rural delivery.

The review team's research has spanned nine administrative regions of England. Evidence has been obtained through regional tours, case studies, customer focus groups, in-depth interviews, written consultations and a literature review. In addition to this programme of fact-finding I have visited Wales,

Scotland, Ireland, France and Germany in order to make comparisons. I have also consulted officials at the European Commission in Brussels about future developments relevant to rural policy and delivery.

Taken together, the contacts I have had with the hundreds of interested organisations and individuals who have contributed to the review make a compelling case for change. **Annex 4** provides an overview of our evidence. Other annexes report on certain elements of our evidence. The main chapters of this report contain quotations that are representative of generally held views or illustrate a wider state of affairs.

I am grateful to the many people who have helped to organise my intensive programme of fact-finding, as I am to all those who have contributed evidence.

## Rural delivery in the future

This report outlines how rural delivery arrangements should evolve, taking account of wider developments in government, in particular the commitment to devolution and moves to make public services more accountable and locally responsive.

I would like to see rural delivery in England becoming much more decentralised than it is, with key decisions being taken at regional and local levels. This is where services can most effectively address public need and where deliverers can be held more clearly to account. I would also like to see greater transparency and accountability in the centre, based upon a clearer definition of roles and better communication between policy developers and delivery experts. There must be an effective flow of information up and down the policy-delivery chain, so that those in charge of policy can take proper account of delivery implications and at the same time hold delivery teams to account. Delivery organisations will be more rationally organised and better co-ordinated. Customers of the services they provide will have a clearer understanding of their rights and obligations.

I expect my recommendations to bring about a situation in which:

- Defra's rural policy remit is well understood by all concerned;
- it is easier to pinpoint accountability for success or failure;
- policy is better attuned to need and takes greater account of delivery issues;
- government works collectively to achieve the best outcomes;
- Defra has better evidence on rural delivery on which to develop policy;
- national leadership on rural policy is clear;
- there is greater regional and local control over rural economic and social outcomes;
- Regional Development Agencies have stronger links with other organisations with an interest in the rural agenda;
- there are fewer regional players engaged in regenerating rural businesses and communities, and there is better co-ordination of rural business advice;
- there are stronger incentives for local authorities to improve rural services;
- delivery of sustainable land management is more effective, rational and efficient;
- accountability for policy development and delivery relating to forestry is clearer;
- delivery of forestry policy in England is better integrated with the government's wider sustainable land management agenda within a modern legal framework;
- levy-funded organisations supporting the marketing and development of agriculture are more efficient;

- regional co-ordination of rural delivery is more efficient (and Government Offices for the Regions have a stronger role as co-ordinators and monitors);
- front line delivery is more co-ordinated and efficient;
- strategic planning is more rational;
- there are better arrangements for regional consultation with stakeholders on rural delivery and for reviewing and challenging rural deliverers;
- best practice in delivery is spread more effectively within and between regions;
- land managers receive more co-ordinated services with the minimum of burdens;
- regulation of farms takes more account of local knowledge and is more locally accountable;
- it is easier to monitor the flow of money supporting rural delivery, and services are more rational and transparent;
- rural development schemes are much more effective in targeting areas and customers with the most deserving needs.

## What this will mean for the customer

The above improvements to the system of delivery will make life better for the customers. They will benefit from having to contend with fewer points of contact, from greater local knowledge on the part of deliverers, more flexible responses to their needs, clearer expectations and a better understanding of their obligations, with fewer unnecessary burdens to face.

As a result of these benefits, one could expect the direct customers of rural delivery to be more instrumental in delivering public good in rural areas, and taxpayers' money will therefore be better used.

## What I have found

My research has highlighted several specific areas in which there is a need for significant improvement. The following list describes the main findings of this review. **Annex 4** gives further background to them.

### Poor accountability

- a) Defra's rural policy remit is not widely understood.
- b) Rural policy and delivery functions are confused and overlapping, blurring accountability.
- c) Rural policy development fails to take proper account of customer needs and the realities of delivery, a situation exacerbated by the lack of a shared, reliable evidence base and confusing definitions of 'rural'.
- d) There is a shortage of management information on rural delivery, which restricts Defra's ability to make policy and to track progress against its objectives.
- e) Targets for rural delivery too often assess administrative processes rather than outcomes and public benefits.

### Failure to satisfy regional and local priorities

- f) Customers are expressing dissatisfaction with the delivery of rural services, which they feel do not address their needs or expectations.
- g) A lack of rigorous standard setting and accountability in the provision of business advice means that quality is variable.

## Too many players

- h) Too many organisations are involved in rural delivery, resulting in confusion (delivery of sustainable land management for example is handled by at least six national agencies working with multiple regional and local organisations).
- i) Customers are confused about the roles of the many organisations involved in rural delivery, above all those dealing with land managers.

## Lack of co-ordination

- j) There are far too many regional strategies (more than 70 regional or sub-regional strategies in one region alone).
- k) Regional co-ordination of delivery is unduly complex, bringing together several organisations with similar or overlapping agendas. Membership of discussion forums is too unwieldy for effective dialogue.
- l) There are too many initiatives, schemes and services (there are for example over 100 separate streams of rural delivery activity and funding in one sub-regional area, such as a National Park). Poor co-ordination has created a complex and confusing delivery landscape.
- m) Many initiatives are insufficiently tied into the regional agenda.
- n) Deliverers have a patchy understanding of the strategic objectives of their work.

## Confused customers

- o) Customers lack clear information on relevant products and services. Scheme guidance, qualifying criteria and application processes are complex and off-putting.
- p) Land managers and rural business owners complain about the bureaucratic approach to regulation and poor co-ordination between regulatory agencies.
- q) Poor communication during the process of scheme applications has led to false expectations, confusion and in some cases wasted investment on the part of the customer.
- r) Delays in the processing of grants adds to customer uncertainty and can undermine benefits.
- s) The prescriptive and inflexible nature of schemes raises serious questions about their ability to target need effectively.
- t) A lack of on-going help and support for projects once the initial grant is received creates unnecessary uncertainty.
- u) Schemes are not sufficiently targeted at those in greatest need and are not designed to be easily accessible to those groups.

In the light of the above there is considerable scope to obtain greater value for taxpayers' money.

## The main recommendations

I have developed five key themes for change, around which the main section of this report is structured (**Chapters 4-8**). A full list of recommendations is in **Annex 1**.

- 1) To improve accountability through a clearer definition of responsibility for policy and delivery functions (see **Chapter 4**).
- 2) To bring delivery closer to the customer by devolving greater responsibility to regional and local organisations for the delivery of economic and social policy (see **Chapter 5**).

- 3) To develop a more integrated approach to sustainable land management by rationalising agencies with overlapping agendas into a new agency responsible for sustainable land management (see **Chapter 6**).
- 4) To improve the co-ordination of delivery by enhancing the role of Government Offices for the Regions as co-ordinators and monitors (see **Chapter 7**).
- 5) To make things better for the customer and get greater value for money for the taxpayer through a more integrated approach to regulation and through simpler services (see **Chapter 8**).

## Improvements arising from the changes

Underlying the specific improvements I have listed above are four intangible benefits that are central to my business case (see **Chapter 9**). These are:

- greater customer satisfaction;
- optimum delivery of the public good, based on better value for money;
- greater flexibility in the system, enabling it to adapt to the changes that lie ahead;
- greater credibility in the government's arrangements.

The changes that are necessary must address the long term. With the necessary leadership, government can achieve a more balanced, realistic system of policy and delivery that promotes delivery of the public good and accommodates the individual. Investing in the longer term should lead to better opportunities for those who wish to work in a regional and local system of government.

As my analysis concludes, these are the fundamental benefits that will flow from my recommendations.

## Reading this report

In developing my recommendations I have sought to trace the causes of the problems that I have identified. I have concluded that many of the difficulties are due to long-standing cultural and institutional problems (which I recognise that the government has been seeking to address). **Chapter 1** seeks to put these in context. It highlights the fundamental need for greater devolution and the separation of responsibility for policy and delivery as being at the heart of the necessary reforms.

**Chapter 2** summarises how the current delivery arrangements work.

The reforms I propose are intended to provide a long term solution. I have naturally had to make a number of assumptions about future policy developments which may have a bearing on rural delivery. These are examined in **Chapter 3**.

My recommendations are analysed under the main elements of the five themes listed above, and they can be found in **Chapters 4-8** of this report.

**Chapter 9** examines costs and benefits and suggests how reform should be taken forward. My proposals should be introduced over a period of three years. I believe that these changes can be effected with the minimum of disruption to staff and business.

- My underlying premise is that the existing arrangements for delivering Defra's rural policies are incapable of coping effectively with the changes that lie ahead whilst delivering value for money to the taxpayer.
- If implemented, I believe that this report will substantially further the delivery of the government's sustainable development objectives in rural communities and the countryside.