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

Summary of comments received and Government response to consultation exercise

May 2012

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Section 1: Introduction

What was proposed?

1.01 In a consultation document published on 1 November 2011, the Government set out in some detail its proposal that the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) should be abolished and rural policy expertise consolidated within Defra. This proposal was driven by a desire to remove duplication, improve efficiency and enable resources to be more effectively focused on securing fair, efficient and affordable outcomes for rural communities in relation to priority policy areas. The Government also set out its view that rural evidence should be drawn from a wide range of sources rather than provided by a single arms length body and that policy functions should be subject to the direct oversight of Ministers, who are accountable to Parliament for the way they discharge this function.

Who responded to the consultation exercise?

1.02 A ninety-day public consultation exercise was conducted, closing on 30 January 2012. A list of those who were invited to respond is provided at Annex B. The consultation paper was also made available via the Defra website and the consultation exercise was promoted through the newsletters and communication channels of the CRC and other rural organisations.

1.03 We received 41 responses to the consultation exercise. Table 1 provides a broad breakdown of the types of organisations/individuals who responded. A list of respondents is provided at Annex A. Copies of all the responses received can be seen at, or obtained from, the Defra HQ library at Ergon House (Telephone 020-7238-6575 Email defra.library@defra.gsi.gov.uk). Copies of the responses will also be made available, on request, to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee and the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee of the House of Lords.

Table 1: Respondents by type and number.

Type of respondent	Number
Private sector businesses and business groups	3
Local Authorities	7
Academic Institutes/Think tanks	3
Voluntary and community sector bodies	8
Members of the Public	3

Membership Body	11
Faith Group	4
NDBP	1
Member of Parliament	1

1.04 Ministers reviewed and took into account the range and content of the comments received before reaching decisions on the issues set out in the consultation document. This report summarises responses to the four questions posed by the consultation document and sets out decisions taken by Government in the light of the consultation exercise.

Section 2: Responses to the consultation questions

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, businesses and communities?

2.01 Responses to this question fell into three broad categories: those who were largely comfortable with the approach being taken by the Rural Communities Policy Unit; those who highlighted specific areas for development; and those who identified areas of concern.

Where you felt we were making good progress

2.02 At least five respondents took the opportunity of the consultation exercise to highlight what they saw as positive developments in the way Government was exercising its rural policy function. In particular, respondents welcomed the development of the Rural and Farming Network (RFN), the intention to produce a Government Rural Statement and Defra’s continued close working with networks such as the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN) co-ordinated by Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE).

You said:

*We welcome the renewed grant in aid investment in the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN) and Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE). We also welcome the creation of the Rural and Farming Network (RFN). **Countryside Alliance***

*We support the production of a Government-wide rural statement. However, in addition to explaining what Defra and the RCPU will do to promote rural needs and interests, this statement should also be very clear about how other Departments will promote these interests, and commit them to taking action to do so. It is important that the representation of rural communities is not regarded as a matter exclusively for delivery by Defra. **Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE)***

*In our view the RCPU has a valuable role to play in ensuring that future expenditure using RGF or similar funds will result in tangible benefits in rural areas. **National Farmers Union (NFU)***

*Whilst the RCPU has made an excellent start it is essential that a focus and objectivity based around qualitative information must be maintained by the RCPU to influence policy making through hard evidence. **Arthur Rank Centre***

Where you identified areas for development

2.03 A number of respondents suggested that Defra should strengthen its links with other Government Departments, noting that Defra's leadership and championing of rural issues was critical to ensuring effective rural proofing of policies across the whole of Government.

You said:

*It is important that the RCPU works effectively to ensure an understanding of rural issues across Government Departments Ensuring that the needs of rural communities are taken seriously is everyone's job within Government, not just the RCPU's. **Rural Affairs Group of General Synod of the Church of England***

*The RCPU will need to champion across Government the role of the rural economy in the broader economy. The proposed Government-wide Rural Statement provides an opportunity to embed across Government a new approach to rural proofing. **National Farmers Union (NFU)***

*A key function of the RCPU must be to ensure that the needs and aspirations of rural businesses are noted and taken into account across Government. We saw the Rural Economy Growth Review as a good example of how this could work, but we need something far more substantial; not just a short term project, but a new way of working and thinking. **Country Land and Business Association (CLA)***

2.04 Some respondents expressed the need for Defra to maintain and strengthen the way it communicates with a wide range of stakeholders to enable its officials accurately to reflect and represent the views and concerns of rural communities and businesses when championing and influencing rural issues across Government.

You said:

*We strongly encourage the shift towards working with a range of rural stakeholders. This will ensure the RCPU's advice, advocacy and expertise is a reflection of numerous sources, rather than a single body giving advice, advocacy and expertise, which unfortunately was the case with the CRC. **Countryside Alliance***

*The RCPU will need to ensure that it is able to establish and sustain effective two-way communications with a wide range of rural interests and channels. Examples include the Leader Local Action Groups, local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships and the Rural Growth Network. The RCPU's evidence base must make full use of available local information sources, including importantly local economic assessments. **Chief Economic Development Officers' Society (CEDOS) and Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT)***

*We recommend continued use by Defra of the LEPs Round Table Meetings. This will be an efficient use of resources and an effective way to cascade information, to learn from LEPs, and to actively and collaboratively develop and review rural policy. **Joint Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin Councils***

*The newly-created Rural and Farming Network (RFN) potentially represents a sound basis for sharing rural issues from both local and Government perspectives, but its full value will only be realised if other Government departments are pulled into the dialogue as appropriate. **Northumberland County Council***

2.05 A number of respondents welcomed the plan to produce a new package of rural proofing materials alongside the Rural Statement and encouraged Defra to make practical guidance available to policy-makers, including detailed examples of rural proofing in action (within all tiers of decision making).

You said:

*The RSN is keen to hear more about how the RCPU intends to promote and support rural proofing across Whitehall departments. We would hope to see practical examples of national policy benefits arising from rural proofing in due course. Since the RCPU has limited resources it would be useful to understand how it intends to target its national rural proofing support. Its links with and capacity for joint working with other departments will be crucial. **Rural Services Network (RSN)***

*Cumbria County Council shares the view of the County Councils Network of the importance of ensuring that refreshed guidance for rural proofing is taken into account by local delivery bodies as well as spread further across Whitehall. **Cumbria County Council***

*We recommend a call for evidence on rural proofing in action to help guide the refreshment of rural proofing materials and analysis of current impact. We would like to then see a more rigorous approach to the rural proofing of Government policy and strategy at a timely point in policy and strategy development as well as in evaluation of policy impacts. **Joint Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin Councils***

2.06 A number of respondents noted the helpful and important role Defra can continue to play in identifying and disseminating emerging and existing good practice in relation to rural service delivery, rural development etc. Some went beyond this and suggested that Defra should be making more of an investment in projects designed to identify and showcase rural good practice.

You said:

*We propose that the RCPU support pilot projects as a means of informing policy and service innovation by providing financial support for projects which shows good practice in conservation, recreation, social, environmental and economic development. **Herefordshire Council***

*We do think Defra could provide a very useful role by helping to support, collate and promote good rural practice at a local policy implementation and delivery level. This is an area where the RSN would be keen to work with the RCPU, as it aligns with one of its own core objectives. **Rural Services Network (RSN)***

*We are keen to work with the RCPU to ensure that, as well as policy analysis and interventions to increase rural awareness, there is also a strong value placed on sharing rural successes and examples of good practice in rural delivery. At the same time it is important to recognise that rural England is far from homogenous – the specific Uplands strand of work within the RCPU is a good starting point for this. **County Council Networks***

*RCPU should be instrumental in showcasing best practice of rural policy analysis and interventions from around the country and in piloting new ways of working within a rural context. In this regard, Northumberland County Council would welcome the opportunity to participate in such activity. **Northumberland County Council***

Where you voiced concerns

2.07 Respondents were, in the main, attracted by the proposition that Defra Ministers would act as rural champions, but some queried whether they and their officials could effectively ensure that rural needs were identified and addressed across the whole range of Government policies and programmes. There was a particular concern that a central government department might struggle to respond proportionately and appropriately to the needs of some of the harder to reach, smaller scale disadvantaged communities in rural England.

You said:

It will be necessary for Defra to decide whether the role of the RCPU will be as a strong and visible champion of all matters rural or the delivery body in charge of a much narrower and shorter agenda. In our view the “champion” role carries risks: positively it promises to have a more significant, positive effect on the operation of Government as a whole, and delivery should be delegated to arms-length bodies such as Natural England and the Environment Agency, if Defra Ministers wholeheartedly adopt the RCPU’s recommendations; negatively, the RCPU becomes a small under-resourced faction within Defra’s policy discourse which can hardly champion rural issues across Defra’s own broad remit, let alone wider government at all scales.

National Farmers Union (NFU)

*The RCPU needs to maintain the CRC’s emphasis on disadvantage and economic under-performance in order to achieve the fairness it espouses. Robust processes are required to ensure transparency and accountability when delivering policies. The RCPU needs to display an ability to be heard across other government departments and to rural proof policy in an effective manner. **Arthur Rank Centre***

2.08 Some respondents felt that the loss of the CRC as an independent voice on behalf of rural communities equated to a loss of transparency in government decision making and accountability. They questioned whether the RCPU would be able to represent the needs of rural communities and businesses objectively from inside Government and were concerned that its work would reflect the pre-determined priorities of Government, rather than the real needs to be found in rural areas. Without an independent voice advocating on behalf of rural communities, there would be a lack of openness, accountability and a loss of trust.

You said:

*Can a work programme easily be delivered by an internal body which is always going to have day-to-day demands on it as a consequence of structural proximity to Ministers? **Commission for Rural Communities***

*We consider CRC has been able to demonstrate a degree of independence that the RCPU will not enjoy as, for example, in its study of the future for upland communities. This leads us to believe that the position of Rural Advocate as an arms-length “critical friend” is an especially important one and that consideration should be given either to sustaining this role or to establishing effective arrangements for the continued delivery of this function, possibly through a closer relationship with RCAN and ACRE. **Cumbria Rural Forum***

*Our major concern is the prioritisation of activities for RCPU and ensuring the wider, ‘non-immediate’ issues of rural communities get side lined to urgent ministerial demands especially in times of cuts to the civil service and underlying support for the unit. CRC has the benefit of standing outside these pressures and the ability to gather the evidence from across the communities and make considered recommendations without fear of reprisal. **Myerscough College***

2.09 A number of respondents expressed concern that current reductions in public sector spending were likely to have a disproportionate negative impact on rural residents and that this would undermine the RCPU’s goal of ensuring practical, fair and affordable outcomes for rural communities. Some respondents also noted concern around the allocation of funding to rural areas and emphasised the importance of continuing recognition of the higher costs associated with service delivery in rural areas (known as the rural premium).

You said:

*A significant challenge will be to minimise the impact of public service cuts to staffing and services on the rural agenda. The deprivation and social isolation experienced by some rural communities could be ‘forgotten’ in the current climate, when resources are likely to be focused where there are high concentrations of deprivation. **Joint Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin Councils***

*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. **AGE UK***

How Government will respond to these comments

2.10 As described in the consultation document, and warmly anticipated by many respondents, Defra is currently in the final stages of preparing a **Government Rural**

Statement which will draw together policies and programmes from across Whitehall to demonstrate Government's aspirations, and support, for rural residents, businesses and communities. The Statement will include a number of positive new measures and describe ongoing action that Defra is taking to promote and support rural interests within and beyond other Government Departments.

- 2.11 The Rural Statement will help focus future activity within the RCPU to ensure that the Unit's finite resources are directed at issues that have the greatest potential to deliver practical benefits for rural communities.
- 2.12 Alongside the Rural Statement, Defra will publish details of a refreshed approach to **Rural Proofing** at a national Government level. As requested by those responding to the consultation, the new package of support offered to policy makers will be practical and robust, showcasing examples of good practice. It will be accompanied by the results of the first phase of a **Local Rural Proofing** project undertaken with partner organisations focused on local level delivery, such as the Local Government Association, National Association of Local Councils and Action for Communities in Rural England. This project is a direct response to the request from stakeholders for a greater focus on decisions taken at a sub-national level and will highlight good practice examples of local bodies designing services and taking decisions in ways which engage and meet the needs of rural communities.
- 2.13 The forthcoming State of Rural Community Transport report, being produced jointly by the RCPU and the Community Transport Association represents another example of Defra working non-Governmental organisations to **showcase local solutions to pressing rural challenges**. Defra greatly welcomes the appetite for this type of approach demonstrated by a number of the organisations which responded to the consultation exercise. This is an area of work that the RCPU is keen to continue to develop and discussions with potential partners are ongoing.
- 2.14 Defra recognises the particular challenge associated with ensuring fair access to services for rural residents at a time when public sector spending needs to reduce. As well as seeking to identify and showcase examples of innovative, cost-effective models of rural service delivery, the RCPU has been working with the Cabinet Office to support Departments to take account of rural needs when implementing the Open Public Services White Paper. And, as part of Government's work on business rates retention, Defra and DCLG are looking at the cost of delivering services in rural areas and whether this is properly reflected in the current system of funding. The Government will consult on any changes considered appropriate as part of the wider consultation on the final shape of the business rates retention scheme later this summer
- 2.15 In establishing the RCPU, Defra has been very conscious of the need to find new, more effective ways of ensuring that **a wide range of rural voices** are able to influence both

the Unit's priorities and policy development across Government. Further information is provided at para 2.26 about the different means by which the RCPU assesses the rural impacts of existing Government policies and keeps in touch with new issues and challenges causing particular concern in rural areas. It is pleasing to note that a number of consultees commented favourably on such recent developments as the **Local Enterprise roundtable** and Defra's new **Rural & Farming Network**. The RCPU is constantly seeking new ways to ensure that it is receiving and responding to high quality 'rural intelligence' with a focus on establishing a number of different communication channels which provide access to a wide range of rural perspectives, rather than over-relying on evidence from a single arms-length body.

- 2.16 We note that some consultees are not yet confident that the RCPU will identify and respond adequately to rural concerns which do not accord with current Government priorities. In developing its relationship with rural stakeholders, the RCPU is seeking to demonstrate **open and transparent ways of working** which encourage and stimulate ongoing and wide-ranging debate about rural needs and potential rural solutions. The work to develop and maintain the rural evidence base described at paragraph 2.23, is particularly critical in ensuring that policy objectives and impacts are tested and evaluated.
- 2.17 Having said this, we are clear that one important reason for establishing the RCPU as a centre of rural expertise within Government is to enable Defra Ministers to be held directly to account for the objectives that the RCPU pursues. Rather than viewing the diversion of RCPU resources onto the **Rural Economy Growth Review** as a negative, Defra Ministers believe it was essential to ensure that the needs and potential of rural businesses were properly taken into account in the wider Growth Review. Despite a challenging timetable, the process enabled a wide range of interested organisations to express a view about specific rural barriers to, and opportunities for, growth and to suggest actions. The outcome was a strong package of measures, announced as part of the 2011 Autumn Statement focussing on some of the key issues for rural areas, namely connectivity through increased rural access to Broadband and mobile services, and specific incentives to encourage economic growth. We believe that these measures, combined with the National Planning Policy Framework, demonstrate Government's commitment to, and practical support for, sustainable economic growth in rural areas.

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

- 2.18 Respondents emphasised the importance of the RCPU continuing to develop and maintain a wide ranging and robust evidence base which accurately reflects the diversity and complexity of life across rural England. Credible evidence was seen as fundamental to the position Defra adopts and champions across Government. Respondents noted

that the CRC had a strong track record of gathering evidence and intelligence and presenting this in ways that people could understand and identify with.

Forging strong links with a wide range of stakeholders

2.19 A significant number of respondents highlighted the need for the RCPU work with a wide range of non-Governmental organisations to ensure that it is able to present Defra Ministers and policy-makers across Government with detailed, practical information and intelligence about the current and potential future impact of policy on rural communities.

You said:

*A partnership approach between RCPU and rural stakeholders may enable a better level of rural information, evidence and intelligence to be available across Government to inform decision making. **Plunkett Foundation***

*The RCPU should ensure that it is talking to and meeting, on a regular basis, the full range of stakeholders with an interest in rural policy issues, including CPRE at both national and local levels. In carrying out its work to identify issues of interest to rural communities, the Unit should be open to receiving submissions and suggestions for action in a wide range of policy areas. **Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE)***

*In our view it will be vital that Defra ensures that its plans for research generally reflect all the functions of the Department, embracing agriculture, food, forestry, rural affairs and the environment. **National Farmers Union (NFU)***

*As a local partnership we particularly valued the role of CRC in holding local/Regional events that enabled sub-national exchange and understanding of data. We feel this is of particular importance across a broad range of topics including, for example, the needs of differing Less Favoured Areas, the rural distribution of fuel, child poverty, and rural access to education and employment. **Cumbria Rural Forum***

Open, accessible, independent evidence

2.20 Six respondents made particular mention of the openness, accessibility and independence of evidence provided by the CRC, and expressed a desire for this to continue. For example, several respondents spoke favourably of the CRC's State of the Countryside Report, and hoped that the RCPU would continue with similar collections and presentations of data.

You said:

*While understanding the needs of Government to retain some confidential information in the policy making process, we hope for a similar level of openness with information, and accessibility of that information (we would cite the State of the Countryside Reports as an example of good practice here) within the sector and to the wider public. **County Councils Network***

*We thought the CRC's State of the Countryside reports provided a very useful source of data. It would be unfortunate for this to disappear. We are unaware of the precise nature of the proposed Evidence Plan and Official Statistics about Rural England, but doubt they will be much of an improvement on the CRC's work. **Country Land & Business Association***

2.21 Some respondents went further to describe their expectations of Defra's research with a particular focus on the importance of ensuring that the distinctive nature of different rural areas and circumstances are reflected.

You said:

*We would want to see reference to the following in the [RCPU's] Evidence Plan: a) The challenges facing the economies and communities of upland England, including the pressures on hill farming; b) The challenges of ensuring an adequate supply of housing in rural areas at prices that local people can afford; c) The continuing challenge of preventing a growing 'digital divide' in relation to high-speed broadband – despite the action being taken by Government generally and Defra in particular; d) Rural service provision, with particular reference to the services offered by the Post Office, health services and banks. **National Farmers Union (NFU)***

*The Rural Coalition hopes that the Evidence Plan to be published by Defra will strongly reflect the department's interest in all rural affairs: in particular that it will include a balanced approach to the commissioning of research which addresses agriculture, the natural environment, food and forestry. **Rural Coalition***

Defra's Rural & Farming Network

2.22 Ten respondents picked up on the reference to the new Rural and Farming Network (RFN) in the consultation report and highlighted specific opportunities and challenges in relation to the ability of these new self-organising and self-supporting groups effectively to represent rural communities. An underpinning theme was a desire to see the RFN being given scope to challenge and contest Defra and wider Government policies. Also, a concern that the RFN needed to represent the breadth and diversity of rural

communities and businesses and not allow single issues to dominate their engagement with Defra.

You said:

*Will the Rural and Farming Networks (RFNs) be able to represent effectively the interests of rural communities, or will they be made up of representatives of a more diverse range of rural interests which, whilst important, will not give sufficient priority to the interests of rural communities? **Commission for Rural Communities (CRC)***

*We would caution Ministers and officials from relying too heavily on the new Rural and Farming Network (RFN). The new RFN has the potential to not only swing the balance back too far towards farming; they are also essentially self-promoting volunteers who may not have the balance of local opinion with them. Whilst the Rural Affairs Fora had to some degree lost the food and farming aspects of the previous MAFF panels, they were balanced across rural interests and sensible to the socio-economic outcomes of environmental policy. **Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS)***

*The new Rural & Farming Networks should be in a position to ‘challenge’ and ‘contest’ where appropriate, although depending on the rural geographical area covered, it may be a challenge in itself to truly and accurately reflect all views from every facet of rural life. **Yorkshire Rural Support Network***

How Government will respond to these comments

2.23 The RCPU has continued to develop its approach to evidence and intelligence gathering. In March 2011, a wide range of stakeholders were invited to a workshop at which they were provided with an update on the RCPU’s work and research programme and invited to take part in a horizon scanning exercise to identify potential gaps in the RCPU’s evidence plan. The organisations represented at the workshop were also asked to identify ways in which they wanted to continue to be involved in Defra’s rural evidence work in the future. The RCPU has already appointed a number of external members to the steering groups overseeing current research projects and will be considering additional mechanisms to ensure there is ongoing independent input to Defra’s rural evidence base.

2.24 Defra is very conscious that the CRC acted as a rich source of quantitative and qualitative evidence and has reviewed and refreshed its statistical reports to ensure that important data series are not lost. The RCPU will continue to keep the data it provides under active review, responding to changing need and seeking to ensure that statistical evidence produced by other organisations provides an urban/rural analysis where appropriate. The following are currently available on the Defra website:

The Statistical Digest of Rural England is a collection of statistics on a range of social and economic subject areas. The statistics are split by rural and urban areas, allowing for comparisons between the different rural and urban area classifications. The Digest includes high level statistics which present an overall picture for England. The statistics within the Digest are updated annually throughout the year.

Quarterly Rural Economic Bulletins contain key statistics relating to the economy in rural and urban areas. The indicators used have been selected because they present a 'real-time' picture of the rural economy.

Statistical Features Reports are currently produced quarterly and summarise key statistics on a particular area of interest relating to the economy in rural and urban areas. Recent reports covered skills and tourism and the economic activity of older people.

The Statistical Digest of the English Uplands contains a range of statistics about the English Uplands. The subject areas include the social, economic and environmental perspective of upland areas with a view to enhance our understanding of the English Uplands. In many cases, the statistics are presented for upland areas and the rest of England, to allow comparisons to be made. By looking at these statistics, it is possible to identify areas where people living in the uplands face difficulty but also recognise the contribution upland areas, and those living in the uplands, make to the country.

- 2.25 Defra's rural evidence plan is part of the Department's wider **Evidence Investment Strategy (EIS)** available on the Defra website. Defra will refresh its EIS in light of the changing political landscape, for example, Defra's Business Plan and progress against the 2010 Spending Review. In doing so, the Department highlights the progress made in implementing the EIS, and summarises the work that has been done on evidence programmes, and the big evidence challenges facing Defra and its network.
- 2.26 The RCPU has made a point of recognising that rural evidence is about both analytical research and the intelligence and insights which can be drawn from a local level. The mechanisms by which the RCPU assesses the rural impacts of existing Government policies and keeps in touch with the challenges and opportunities to be found in rural England, include:

The Rural Community Action Network (RCAN): Defra provides funding for a network of 37 rural community development organisations (collectively known as Rural Community Councils) across England. RCAN is facilitated at a national level by Action for Communities in Rural England (ACRE) and the network supports community-led action in rural areas and works to increase the long-term sustainability of rural community life. Defra and ACRE have reviewed and refreshed their partnership to ensure that Government benefits from regular access to both up-to-date local intelligence about the impact of current policy in rural areas and expert practitioners who can offer practice

advice on the design and implementation of new policies and programmes. As part of this work, ACRE has established expert reference groups focused on Broadband, Fuel & Energy, Housing & Planning and Services & Transport.

The Rural and Farming Network: This new network of local groups from across England has been established to identify and feedback local issues and concerns direct and unfiltered to Defra Ministers. Each group is self-organising and self-supporting, bringing together people from rural communities and rural businesses (including the food and farming industries).

The Rural Coalition: The RCPU meets regularly with the Rural Coalition to facilitate strategic input into key policy areas across Government, for example, Housing, Planning and Economic Growth. Chaired by Lord Robin Teverson, the Rural Coalition comprises 15 member organisations who subscribe to a vision for a living and working countryside.

Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs): Defra facilitates a regular Roundtable for LEPs to discuss, among other policy issues, the rural economy. It provides an open and frank forum for exchange of views and experience amongst the LEPs and with policy makers.

The Rural Business Finance Forum (RBFF): The RBFF is made up of key business organisations with a rural interest. It advises Defra on the impacts of policy on rural businesses including providing strategic business input into the Rural Economic Growth Review.

The Rural Services Network: A working arrangement with this membership organisation devoted to safeguarding and improving services in rural communities across England enables the RCPU to disseminate information and call for evidence about rural impacts and solutions.

The Leader Exchange Group: Representatives from Local Action Groups and Accountable Bodies across the country have recently been invited to join this new national group. The Leader Exchange Group provides a structured environment for two way communication between Defra, other Government Departments and those involved in LEADER delivery within the Rural Development Programme for England. It is enabling all interested parties to share experience and ideas relevant both to delivery under the current programme and the design of future EU programmes.

2.27 Defra is bound by the Statistics and Registration Services Act and its associated code of practice. This ensures that Defra's evidence and research is free from political influences. It also requires Defra to publish the reports it commissions and associated research findings. This is additional degree of **independence and accessibility** applies to all statistical and research outputs produced by the department. The RCPU is

currently investigating ways to increase the extent to which its data and other evidence can be used at a local as well as a national level.

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

2.28 Of the 41 responses received, 12 respondents supported abolition of the Commission for Rural Communities, with five of those setting out some conditions to their support. 12 were opposed, and 16 respondents did not state their support or opposition to the CRC’s abolition. 1 respondent did not answer the question. See table 2 below for a detailed breakdown of response types.

Table 2: Responses to the question of the CRC’s abolition

Agree with Abolition or did not object	Agree with abolition, with conditions	Neither agree nor disagree with abolition	Opposed to abolition	Did not answer
7	5	16	12	1

Views of those who agreed with the proposal to abolish the CRC

2.29 Underpinning much of the support for the proposed abolition was a preference for rural policy functions to be performed within central Government, rather than outside of government by an arm’s length body.

You said:

*The CRC had, before it was ‘streamlined’, an important role to play, particularly in supporting rural communities through targeted funding streams, specific research and considered advice. However, it appeared to have an ambiguous position because of its ‘arm’s length role’. We feel that a clearer separation of these functions would provide benefits for the development and implementation of rural policy. **Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI)***

*Whilst we have immense respect for the work the CRC, and particularly Stuart Burgess, have done we now think it time that its remit and functions are brought fully within Defra. In our experience to date, the RCPU is working well. **Country Land and Business Association (CLA)***

2.30 Five respondents attached some conditions to their support for the proposed abolition. They tended to take the view that the roles played by the CRC played to date could be

undertaken equally well within the RCPU and supported the decision to bring the expertise and experience of CRC and Defra staff together into a single unit. Respondents were keen to emphasise that stakeholder engagement should remain a high priority for the RCPU and sought assurance that some form of independent scrutiny of the Government's approach to rural proofing should be built into the rural policy function.

You said:

*ACT accepts the Government decision on "Arms-length agencies". However, we did and continue to feel that there was a particular value in the degree of independence that an arms-length relationship gave to the Rural Advocate. Clearly, there should not be government duplication of the RCPU and we hope the Government will recognise and support the independence of ACRE and the RCAN network in giving non-political, evidence led, and independent advice. **ACTion Communities in Cumbria***

*RICS hopes that the RCPU, as a merger between CRC and existing DEFRA rural policy staff, will succeed in rural proofing policy and strategy across national and local government an integrated approach to the countryside and its link with urban areas ... will ensure that policy making emphasises economic, social and environmental wellbeing and diversity in its communities Given that in abolishing CRC the RCPU will lose its '**critical friend**', there may need to be thought given to how that function is replaced at little cost and with a level of transparency. **Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS)***

*There has historically been a need for advice and information independent of Government and Plunkett feels that the need remains. Aspects of this role can be achieved in part through active comprehensive engagement with rural stakeholders and partners. **Plunkett Foundation***

Views of those who disagreed with the proposal to abolish the CRC

2.31 The twelve respondents who clearly opposed the abolition of the CRC raised two key challenges to the Government's proposals. The first of these related to the contention that having both the CRC and Defra's RCPU operating alongside each other would create duplication and confusion. A number of respondents disagreed with this, highlighting, in particular, the value of an arms length body, such as the CRC maintaining an independent and distinct stance from that taken by the core government department.

You said:

As the consultation document states, the streamlined CRC 'continues to act as a critical friend to Defra'. We believe that maintaining this slimmed down organisation is important in keeping a

*voice for rural communities that can go straight to the heart of government, while standing at arm's length from it. **Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE)***

*We do support the proposal that the Government consider an alternative model which recognises the importance of interpreting evidence relating to rural communities objectively and **independently**, thereby avoiding the accusation of using evidence to suit predetermined priorities. **Cornwall Housing Association***

2.32 A second challenge related to the savings that could be made by abolishing the CRC. Respondents suggested that the projected savings estimated to be accrued from abolishing the CRC were not significant enough when compared to the value the CRC was able to offer.

You said:

*'... abolishing the CRC will deliver only modest savings. Despite this, it states that Government does not wish to fund an arm's length body to act as an expert adviser, advocate and watchdog on behalf of rural communities. For our part, particularly given the relatively modest savings involved, we believe that the removal of the Commission for Rural Communities as an independent voice for rural areas is too great a price to pay'. **Chief Economic Development Officers' Society (CEDOS), and Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT)***

*CRC and its predecessor was not perfect but it filled an important gap in representation for rural communities which cannot be effectively filled by a government department. The previous government had already downsized and restructured the Countryside Agency to create CRC **and the present proposal is a step too far. Campaign for Community Banking***

*The loss of the hard statistical evidence provided by the CRC would prove enormously detrimental to the well-being of rural communities. The loss of the CRC's emphasis on disadvantaged people and economic under-performance, particularly in the current economic climate, would be unfortunate, undermining and untimely. **Arthur Rank Centre***

2.33 In its response, the CRC accepted (with certain caveats) that its advisory and advocacy functions had been integrated into Defra, but suggested that there might be value in the Government establishing a Rural Adviser function, reporting directly to Defra Ministers, to provide an independent view and act as a critical friend.

Views of those who did not express an opinion on abolition

You said:

*We believe that there continues to be a role for a small, independent body to provide an objective 'watchdog' view of developing policy across Government relating to rural communities, to scan the horizon for new issues as they emerge, and to make recommendations. **Commission for Rural Communities (CRC)***

- 2.34 There were sixteen respondents who, for varying reasons, did not clearly state a position on this question. Some broad member-based respondents were unable to arrive at a clear collective position. Another common theme was recognition that difficult decisions need to be made in the current economic climate and that respondents did not feel in a position to challenge the Government's view that this financial saving was required.

You said:

*The arguments for and against abolishing the CRC – taken together with the opportunity this provides for the RCPU – are finely balanced and the Rural Coalition will not be taking a collective view on this specific question. **The Rural Coalition***

*The arguments for and against abolishing the CRC – taken together with the opportunity this provides for the RCPU - are finely balanced. **County Councils Network***

*We recognise that in the current political and economic climate the possibility of the CRC being retained, although desirable is likely to be unrealistic. **Arthur Rank Centre***

*A reduction of resources focused on understanding the nature of rurality and the policy implications would be of concern. Equally the loss of independent voice at a national level on rural issues is also of concern – much will depend on the effectiveness of the emerging RFN. **Northumberland County Council***

Question 4: Do the proposals have any direct impact on you (if so, please explain the impact, including any supporting evidence)?

- 2.35 Respondents provided details of impacts arising from both the proposed abolition of the CRC and the consolidation of new policy functions within Government.

Proposed abolition of the CRC

- 2.36 Twenty respondents indicated that the abolition of the CRC would have no impact on their operations, with no further evidence offered to support this view. Fourteen respondents noted an indirect or direct impact on their operational activity. However, some of those describing impacts did not feel that they provided a compelling enough reason to oppose the abolition of the CRC.
- 2.37 Indirect or direct impacts were described in the following ways. A number of respondents noted that the loss of CRC as an independent advisor; advocate and watchdog may have a detrimental effect on the ability of Government policy making to penetrate into rural areas and diminish the extent to which local decision-makers recognise the particular needs of rural communities. A couple of respondents also highlighted historical and financial links with the CRC that, due to abolition, would no longer exist with some direct consequences for their future operation.

You said:

*If the proposed abolition of the Commission for Rural Communities is carried through, we consider the loss of an independent adviser; advocate and watchdog could have a direct adverse impact in many areas. **Chief Economic Development Officers' Society (CEDOS), and Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT)***

*The CRC regularly provided a small but important amount of sponsorship for Plunkett's annual Rural Social Enterprise conference which has run for over 10 years. **Plunkett Foundation***

*This Campaign coalition was established in 1998 and from the very early years the Countryside Agency, later the Commission for Rural Communities, was a supporter and funder and for many years, terminating when abolition was proposed, a valued member of our Steering Group. We have been unable to replace CRC as a supporter and Steering Group member, to represent the voice of rural communities. **Campaign for Community Banking***

- 2.38 Some respondents were concerned that the loss of the CRC might impact on the quality of services that they are able to provide for their members such as the sharing of effective practice, interpreting policy developments and ensuring that the voices of the harder to reach in rural communities are heard by Government. It was also noted that this proposal would remove a route through which stakeholders are currently able to challenge Government policy.

You said:

*Many of our member authorities have substantial rural areas, including the most peripheral rural communities and disadvantaged rural areas in England. Government policies and the extent to which they recognise the particular needs and circumstances of rural areas clearly affect local authority service delivery and the ability to address local issues and support rural growth and competitiveness. **Chief Economic Development Officers' Society (CEDOS), and Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT)***

*The proposals impact on how local authorities influence rural policies which emanate from central government. Rural policies from central government impact on how local authorities deliver public services, address local issues, and deliver rural growth and competitiveness. Likewise, the outcome of the consultation impacts on other policies with significant "rural" impact such as local capacity building, renewable energy, active labour market policies, migration and service delivery, environmental issues, etc. Having a voice in policy development is crucial to local authorities which in the past have worked with the Commission for Rural Communities in gathering evidence base which in turn feeds into policy. We do not want to lose this voice. **Herefordshire Council***

*The objective, hard evidence produced by the CRC, particularly the State of the Countryside reports, has proved invaluable in my work of supporting rural communities and their churches. The absence of such material will have a direct impact on me and my work. **Arthur Rank Centre***

- 2.39 Some stakeholders also indicated that they had used the CRC's website to obtain current data and briefings on rural issues. The objective, hard evidence produced by the CRC, particularly the State of the Countryside reports were, in particular, cited by respondents as having tangible and practical value and a number were keen that such sources of evidence and data should not be lost.

New policy functions within Government:

- 2.40 A number of respondents highlighted the beneficial impacts of the proposals, welcoming the creation of the RCPU which some saw as incorporating and building upon the qualities of the CRC. Respondents also noted that the process of developing new policy functions was enabling Government to review and strengthen its relationships with and the links between rural interest groups. It was noted however, that effective policy development will largely depend on RCPU's ability to engage with stakeholders and gather evidence capable of influencing policy development across Government.

- 2.41 A number of respondents said that they were keen to work with the RCPU to ensure rural policy accurately reflects the needs and aspirations of rural communities and businesses, and is informed by current, up to date evidence, research and evaluated good practice.

You said:

*As one of Defra's main stakeholders the proposals will have an impact on the way we work. We anticipate that they will do much to improve the way in which the non-Defra parts of the Government interact with the rural economy. **Country Land and Business Association (CLA)***

*If these proposals go ahead it will effectively create a positive and effective point of reference and expertise in RCPU, that will incorporate and enhance the quality of the CRC, as well as integrate with EU rural policy, with the RFN, with rural natural environment policies currently managed by Natural England, and with the rural planning element of CLG, then they should be supported. **David Alexander, Freelance Planner in Rural & Environment Issues***

The Rural Coalition is too young to have formed a strong partnership with the CRC and it now sees the RCPU as a key partner. The Rural Coalition will want to maintain strong working relations with whatever rural policy structures central government puts in place.

How Government will respond to these comments

- 2.42 The Government has carefully considered all comments received in response to this consultation exercise and has updated the impact assessment published alongside the original consultation document in November 2011. It is noted that the volume of responses was relatively low when compared with many Government consultations and a significant proportion of those commenting were either supportive of, or relatively ambivalent about, the proposal to abolish the CRC. However, a number of issues were raised to which Government considers it important to respond.
- 2.43 Government is satisfied that the current and future development of the RCPU will meet the needs expressed by those who attached some conditions to their support for the proposed abolition of the CRC. A number of organisations emphasised that the RCPU should enable a **diverse range of rural voices** to have an input into the development of Government policy both within and beyond Defra. The arrangements described at paragraph 2.26 represent a significant step change in the way that stakeholders are engaged in the development and implementation of rural policy. More structured discussions are taking place with a broader range of organisations, many directly

involving the lead policy Department as well as the RCPU. There is increasing interchange of ideas, experience and good practice at both a national and a sub-national level and an emphasis on those raising concerns and issues being given regular feedback about action taken within Government.

2.44 Government is satisfied that these new arrangements ensure that there is a high level of **independent input and challenge** to the way Defra undertakes its rural policy functions. Rather than dealing with a single arms length body entirely dependent on Government for its funding, the RCPU is building relationships with a wide range of organisations and individuals capable of giving an unfiltered account of current rural challenges and opportunities. In the case of RCAN and the Rural and Farming Network, Defra is also helping to build the capacity of rural communities across the country to influence local decision-making.

2.45 As mentioned at paragraph 2.12, Defra will publish a refreshed approach to **Rural proofing** alongside the planned Rural Statement. Consideration is currently being given to how best to ensure effective independent scrutiny of implementation of this new approach across Government. However, Ministers are satisfied that it is neither appropriate nor necessary to retain the CRC or establish a new publically-funded entity to carry out this function.

2.46 Ministers have reviewed the proposed abolition of the CRC and are satisfied that it would serve the purpose of improving the exercise of public functions having regard to:

Efficiency - by consolidating the rural policy function within Defra rather than retaining two separate publically-funded teams each seeking to gather evidence about rural impacts, engage with rural stakeholders and support Government Departments to take proper account of rural needs and opportunities as they develop their policies and programmes;

Effectiveness – by basing that rural policy function within a core Department where there is scope for early involvement in the development of policies and programmes which have the greatest potential to benefit rural businesses and communities and an ability to brief Ministers who have direct responsibility for championing rural needs across Government, rather than within an arms length body which, by its very nature, does not have access to the same level of information and opportunities to influence;

Economy – the abolition of the CRC will enable savings to be made of approximately £600,000 pa;

Accountability – the changes proposed will enable Defra’s Ministers to be held directly accountable by Parliament for the exercise of Government’s rural policy functions whilst the transparency with which the RCPU will operate, together with the variety of non-

Governmental organisations capable of speaking up on behalf of rural communities, will ensure an appropriate degree of public accountability.

Section 3: Next Steps

- 3.01 Government intends to lay a draft Order in Parliament during May seeking abolition of the Commission for Rural Communities under Section 1 of the Public Bodies Act 2011. The draft Order will be subject to Parliamentary scrutiny (and will require its approval) and, as part of this process, Defra will make the individual responses to this consultation exercise available to both the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee and the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee of the House of Lords.
- 3.02 Subject to Parliamentary approval of the draft order, Government will be seeking to abolish the CRC by 31 March 2013.

Annex A: Respondents to the Consultation

ORGANISATION
1. David Alexander (Freelance Planner in Rural & Environmental Issues)
2. Plunkett Foundation
3. Countryside and Community Research Institute
4. Commission for Rural Communities
5. Herefordshire Council
6. Member of Public
7. East Lindsey District Council
8. Age UK
9. Joint Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin Councils
10. Yorkshire Rural Support Network
11. Rural Affairs Group of General Synod of the Church of England
12. Campaign to Protect Rural England
13. Rural Services Network
14. Leicester Rural Partnership & Leicester Enterprise Partnership
15. National Farmers Union
16. CEDOS & ADEPT: Chief Economic Development Officers' Society (CEDOS), and Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT)
17. Rural Coalition
18. Action with Communities in Cumbria (ACT)
19. Cumbria Rural Forum
20. Arthur Rank Centre - Gordon Gatward
21. Arthur Rank Centre - Graham Jones
22. Royal Agricultural Society of England

23. Plumpton College
24. Pub is the Hub
25. Cornwall Rural Housing Association
26. Andrew George MP
27. County Councils Network (CCN)
28. Action in Rural Sussex
29. End Violence against Women
30. Methodist Church
31. Cumbria County Council
32. Northumberland County Council
33. Countryside Alliance
34. Country Land & Business Association (CLA)
35. Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS)
36. National Association for Small Schools
37. Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS)
38. Early Childhood Forum
39. Simon Drummond-Hay Chartered Surveyor
40. Myerscough College
41. Campaign for Community Banking

Annex B: Stakeholders invited to comment on the Consultation

Community Transport Association
Plunkett Foundation
Rural Services Network
Consumer Focus
Citizen's Advice Bureaux
Local Government Association: Local Government Improvement and Development
National Association of Local Councils (NALC)
Age UK
Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE)
Joseph Rowntree Foundation
Arthur Rank Centre
Local Government Association
Central and Local Information Partnership
Action for Market Towns (AMT)
Campaign to Protect Rural England
Country Land and Business Association (CLA)
Town and Country Planning Association
Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)
Northern Rural Network

Rural Evidence Research Centre
Countryside and Community Research Institute
Rural Economy and Land Use Programme
Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)
Rural Coalition
Children and Young Peoples Rural Coalition
Action for Children
National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)
Together for Children
National Association of Small Schools
National Association of Head Teachers
National Children's Bureau
Pub is the Hub
Business in the Community
English Heritage
National Trust
Historic Houses Association
Princes Trust
Princes Rural Action Programme
Post Office Ltd
Land Based and Environmental Industries (Lantra)

Rural Cultural Forum
Women's Food and Farming Union
Coastal Communities Alliance
Countryside Alliance
Ofcom
Heritage Link
Additional Stakeholders
Women in Rural Enterprise
Church of England Rural Affairs Group
Rural Media Company
Rural Shops Alliance
Social Enterprise Coalition
Development Trusts Association
National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)
British Association for Shooting and Conservation
Women's Institute
Society of Local Council Clerks
Local Enterprise Partnership
Black Country LEP
Cheshire & Warrington LEP
Coast to Capital LEP

Cornwall and Isles of Silly LEP
Coventry and Warwickshire LEP
Cumbria LEP
Derby Derbyshire Nottingham and Nottinghamshire LEP (aka D2N2)
Dorset LEP
Enterprise M3 LEP
Gloucestershire LEP
Greater Cambridge and Greater Peterborough LEP
Heart of the South West LEP
Hertfordshire LEP
Humber LEP
Lancashire LEP
Leicester and Leicestershire LEP
Lincolnshire LEP
New Anglia LEP
North Eastern LEP
Northamptonshire LEP
Oxford City Region LEP
Solent LEP
South East Midlands LEP

South East LEP
Stoke and Staffordshire LEP
Tees Valley LEP
Thames Valley Berkshire LEP
The Marches-Shropshire and Herefordshire LEP
West of England LEP
Worcestershire LEP
York and North Yorkshire LEP
Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP
Greater Manchester
Leeds City Region
Liverpool City Region
Sheffield City Region