

**ECOVAST International Conference – 16 October – paper from Dr Stuart Burgess (10.00 – 10.35 including questions and discussion) – Ventnor Botanic Garden Conference Centre – Ventnor – Isle of Wight**

**Note this presentation will be translated for non English speaking delegates**

**Rural development – looking to the future from the English perspective**

Good morning. Thank you for the invitation to speak to you.

I want to talk to you this morning about the subject of rural development and some of the lessons and experiences we have in England.

But first a word about me. I am the Chairman of the Commission for Rural Communities. This Commission is a Government agency, set up with an independent Chair and board of commissioners. The Commission has three roles. Firstly, to advise Government departments and others on rural matters. Secondly, to be a champion and advocate to Government about rural communities and the contribution that they make to the whole country. And thirdly, to act as a Watchdog, reporting on the extent to which Government policies and programmes designed for everyone are or are not reaching rural people and communities.

Some of you may know that my role and the work of the Commission for Rural Communities will shortly be drawing to an end. In June our Secretary of State, Caroline Spellman, who heads up the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, announced that the Commission was to be abolished.

I and my commissioners feel that the loss of an independent Commission is regrettable. But I'm also pleased that our Secretary of State does want parts of our work to continue within the heart of Government, within Defra. She recognizes the need for decision makers across government to receive expert advice about the impact of their policies on people who live and work in rural areas.

We are now working hard to make sure that the CRC's strengths – including a focus on evidence and on practical solutions - are transferred to Defra's new Rural Communities Policy Unit.

However, let me stress that the CRC is not yet gone! We have agreed with our minister a focus for our work over the next few months. During the autumn we will be pursuing this agenda with energy.

Let me address the subject of your conference. Rural development.

Rural development and helping realise the potential of our rural economies has been a key theme of my work as Chairman of the Commission for Rural Communities.

Based on my experiences of visiting many rural businesses and village and market town communities over the last few years I have tried to bring the government's view up to date on what is happening on the ground and what more can be done to help support our rural economies.

I am hopeful that the rural economy is in a very good position to emerge from the recession and continue to grow and expand. Given all my travels and experiences across the country – meeting incredibly hard working and energetic

businessmen and women – this is not surprising. There is a sense of energy and entrepreneurship in rural England that is very inspiring.

And I hope that those of you who were on the study trip yesterday around the Isle of Wight got the same positive and can-do impression.

We recently published a report on rural economies. It is called *Agenda for Change: releasing the economic potential of England's rural areas*. It is available from the CRC's website.

Over the last year rural businesses - via a series of Economic Summits that we hosted across the country – made it very clear that they are ambitious to grow and prosper. And they had clear views on some of the ways that government can help. Our report reflects those views.

Caroline Spellman has now asked the CRC to discuss with Government departments and others the proposals that we are making in this report.

Let me touch briefly on three of the recommendations. We are suggesting that in England we need to do more to help local democracy work well on economic matters. So:

- Firstly. The new Local Enterprise Partnerships that many in local government are now establishing must work to support rural economic growth as part of their mainstream work. This may be easier said than done. And Government departments need to work together with others to help make sure that this happens. For example, it is critical that the European Rural Development Programme fits in with other mainstream economic development plans and programmes. It should not be allowed to be a separate and stand alone programme. If it is then this allows

policy makers to pretend that rural development is OK left to itself and the RDPE. It is not. More on this in a minute.

- Secondly. We want local authorities to continue to support and respond to Community Led Plans such as Parish Plans and Market Town plans. And help make sure that such plans include business and employment ambitions and actions. For example, I know that recently Shropshire Council decided to extend the use of a sustainable rural communities toolkit to its market towns. And I hope that this will prove to be a valuable way forward for all concerned.
- Thirdly, we also believe that local and central government need to work harder together to deliver a more consistent – but not uniform – planning regime in rural England. One designed to support sustainable economic growth.

And there are other recommendations, for example on broadband, on housing, on red tape and on business taxation.

Let me turn to the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE). As most of you will know the this is a seven year funding programme, with a budget of £3.9 billion, which will bring into effect the rural development priorities or axes of the European Rural Development Regulation.

The CRC has the job, on behalf of our parent department Defra, to co-ordinate the RDPE Network and UK National Rural Network, both requirements of the European Rural Development Regulation, acting as the Network Unit.

The role of the RDPE Network is to support the delivery of the programme through:

- Providing tools and opportunities for those involved in RDPE to share their ideas, practice and experience;
- Operating across the four axes and link information at EU, UK, national, regional and local levels;
- Working with existing information exchange mechanisms and networks, to avoid duplication and maximise joint opportunities.

There are a number of different ways that the Network may be of use to you, so that you can utilise other people's ideas and experience to make the most of the funding available for your business, community or rural area. These include: face-to-face activities, discussion forums, news and publications and links to funding sources across the regions.

All Network activities and services are open and accessible to anyone.

Everybody involved with RDPE, whether in programme management or using the funding are encouraged to get involved and share their ideas, knowledge, experience and practice with others, to make the most of RDPE funding for rural areas.

The UK National Rural Network (UK NRN) links the four networks developed for the rural development programmes in England (RDPE), Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The UK NRN acts as a hub to bring together ideas, information and practice from across the UK and provides the interface for information from the European Commission and the European Network for Rural Development.

For more information- please see the leaflets which we have with us which contains the web addresses for both networks.

## Conclusion

In conclusion let me highlight the lessons we have learnt about rural development and rural economies over the last few years.

We know that rural economies are amongst the most successful local economies anywhere in the country. Our villages and small and market towns are generally vibrant and healthy and with good prospects for the future. (Although there are still some pockets of disadvantage). This is good for the health of UK PLC. But they could achieve far more.

How can this happen? Firstly, by central and local government bodies paying attention to the health of our rural economies. By investing in success. Too much attention and resource goes into supporting deprived usually urban areas. Of course this is important. But at this challenging time in our national economic fortunes we should also be investing in what works and helping realise more of the considerable and untapped potential of our rural economies.

And this especially includes our small and market towns. Too often in the past they have been the poor relation in our economic development policies. This needs to change. One of the CRC's final projects is working with Action for Market Towns and with others to make a case for a strong focus in Government on supporting and developing the potential of our small and market towns.

Secondly, when Government develops policies, plans and programmes it needs to make sure that these will work effectively in sparsely populated rural areas as much as elsewhere. This is the process of what we call 'rural proofing'. For example, training and apprenticeship programmes need to be structured in ways

that works for trainees and rural businesses, often small businesses, which are located many miles from city centres. And don't let central or local government put rural development into a box marked 'European rural development funding'. That is a cop out that allows them to ignore their responsibilities supporting rural development.

And thirdly, by local people and local communities supporting economic development and growth. This means local planning policies that help and not hinder. Even in our most protected landscape areas there is a need for local policies and local planning to support economic growth. Yes, that growth needs to be in keeping with the landscape. And yes, it can be done. Indeed the RDPE's LEADER approach, bottom up support and action, shows that this approach can work.

In summary and conclusion:

- Pay attention to our rural economies. Particularly our small and market towns.
- Invest in success.
- Rural proof economic policies and programmes so that they will work in rural areas. And ...
- Give local people a strong say and a strong responsibility for supporting local economic growth.