
**ACREnetwork evidence to the
House of Lords Select
Committee Enquiry into 'The
Natural Environment and
Rural Communities Act 2006'**

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Introduction

1. The ACREnetwork consists of 38 County level rural development charities and their national association: Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE). Members of the network have assisted rural communities to manage and adapt to change for over 80 years especially over issues such as affordable housing, access to local services, health & wellbeing and rural isolation.
2. The scope of the enquiry into the 2006 Act is defined by changes to the 'machinery of government' that were created by the Act, their effectiveness and the impact of subsequent changes not envisaged in the Act.
3. ACRE's evidence is being submitted on the behalf of the whole ACREnetwork and therefore encompasses both a national viewpoint on how a rural dimension to public policy has been addressed since the Act came into force and also a more local one, derived from 38 rural development charities experience on how this has been rolled out to local government and government's more local agencies.
4. The evidence is structured in a way that answers the Select Committee's questions 1., 2., 3. and 10. Question 10 appears only to be interested in the impact of Brexit on nature and environmental standards, however we would like to also submit views on its impact on rural communities. We will not address the element concerned with the natural environment other than where 'machinery of government' implications have also had an impact on 'rural proofing' or rural communities in this question.
5. In addition, the current disposition of responsibilities within Whitehall can seem to systematically 'let down' rural communities. However, to understand thoroughly how this has arisen requires extending our evidence back to changes that were made immediately following the 1997 General Election. We have summarised the institutional changes that have taken place since 1997 at the beginning of our evidence and added a short annex about these changes at the end.
6. The concept of communities feeling 'let down' by government also relates to a separate House of Lords Select Committee investigation into 'Citizenship and Civic Engagement', especially Question 9 published by this other Committee. We believe there is clear applicability of our evidence to the questions being asked by both Committees and so we are submitting our evidence to both. The ACREnetwork response to the House of Lords Select Committee into 'Citizenship and Civic Engagement' has been included as an appendix to this submission.

Government and rural communities – a timeline

'Family tree' of rural non-departmental public bodies concerned with rural people and communities:

1909 to 1998

- Development Commission (DC) – Standing Royal Commission with responsibility to advise government spanning the social and economic health of rural England. Subsequently renamed Rural Development Commission (RDC) and given the powers of a corporate body.

1997 Labour administration

- RDC is wound up
- Economic remit of the RDC passed to new Regional Development Agencies
- New Countryside Agency (CA) is created out of remainder of the RDC and the Countryside Commission
- Countryside Agency comes under the wing of the new Dept. of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

2006 Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act

- The Countryside Agency is wound up and Natural England created out of the countryside management elements of its remit and most of English Nature.
- The Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) is created from the remaining parts of the CA covering just 'rural proofing' and research / advocacy over rural community issues

2010 Coalition government - 'Bonfire of the Quangos'

- CRC is wound up as a separate non-departmental public body and the core of its functions transferred to a unit within DEFRA known as the Rural Communities Policy Unit (RCPU)

2015 - Ongoing re-focusing of DEFRA on its core and economic objectives

- RCPU is disbanded with various teams within DEFRA picking up liaison with other government departments as resources allow

7. Prior to the 2015 General Election Lord Cameron of Dillington was invited by government to review arrangements for 'rural proofing'. His report and recommendations were published in 2015 and, along with government's response, bear re-reading. They focus primarily on Whitehall mechanisms that could, if carried out with vigour, enthusiasm and resource create more 'joined up' implementation of policies towards rural areas across government.
8. For Lord Cameron's recommendations to be effective, however, policies towards rural people and services would need to exist, enthusiasm for them would need to stem from political will, and resources would need to be allocated. Government's response was supportive in principle, but was careful not to commit to any of these.
9. This brings us up to the present day and the point at which we start our evidence on the questions raised directly by the Committee.

Evidence to Enquiry: Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006

Question 1. Are the CRC's original functions of advocate, adviser and watchdog being fulfilled?

10. No.

11. The only government, internal, arrangement that appears to have been put in place following the winding up of both the CRC and the RCPU is the allocation of the title 'Rural Ambassador', alongside many other functions, to one of the Ministers within DEFRA. Associated with this role, policy officials within DEFRA retain a watching brief over policy development in other departments, data relevant to DEFRA's responsibilities and externally generated research. It is understood that the current Rural Ambassador puts a good deal of energy into maintaining relationships with junior ministers in other departments in order to keep rural communities on their agenda. It is not clear what evidence exists for the effectiveness of this activity so it is hard to judge from a grassroots perspective if it is making any difference to rural people and communities.

12. It should be stressed that whilst the effectiveness of the CRC within Whitehall and Westminster may have been limited, its ability to commission high quality – if lengthy – reports about the impact of a great variety of social and economic issues on rural people had a wide impact. Rural voluntary organisations, including ACREnetwork members, were able to use these reports to demonstrate rural needs to a variety of commissioners, service delivery organisations and funders. To this extent the publishing side of the CRC's activities were effective and have not been replicated.

13. It is instructive to look at each of the three functions separately.

1.1 Advocate

14. Non-governmental organisations such as ACRE, Rural England CIC, The Rural Services Network, and the Rural Coalition have sought to influence government to ensure policies and delivery are rural proofed. There is limited evidence of this external lobbying being effective at the level of detail that is required. In addition, if any of these agencies receive financial support from government there has been a clear direction given by officials that advice to government resulting from funded activity must not form any part of a case for additional investment in rural areas. We will return under Question 2 to the fundamentals of rural proofing and the relationship to costs of delivery.

15. The role of 'rural advocate' has continued to be pursued by most of the ACREnetwork at a local level insofar as they are resourced to do this. However, Government Departments tend to seek large scale outcomes from the agencies through which they operate at a local level, based on a very urban view of what needs to be achieved. This limits the effectiveness of local advocacy, however enthusiastically it is carried out by members of the ACREnetwork.

Examples include: The LEPs resourcing and tasking framework places most emphasis on large scale economic development housing and transport initiatives; the Sustainability and Transformation Plans of the NHS are very largely focused on specialist hospital services that require ever larger catchment areas and economies of scale; investment in affordable

housing is increasingly only possible if leveraged by large scale urban developments that provide little benefit to rural communities.

16. Advocating for the needs of rural communities to local government must be seen in the context of localism, dramatic reductions in funding, and the rapid move to service commissioning by local government. Taken together, these severely limit the ability of local government to meet the additional costs of providing services equitably in different locations irrespective of the economies of scale that are available in any given place. Detailed knowledge of service delivery has been lost from authorities that have become dominated by procurement and commissioning. This means there is seldom anyone capable of understanding 'rural advocacy' if it conflicts with 'lowest cost procurement'. In many rural areas, social value commissioning is still in its infancy.

Example: Social care contracts continue to be let to both private and charitable providers using operational models that ignore differences in travel time between clients in urban and rural areas. Alternatively contract areas combine large urban and rural locations in ways that prevent small scale providers from tendering to meet needs in an economical way at a very local level.

1.2 Adviser

17. The adviser role within Whitehall is more complex. The only source of internal advice to government departments is from DEFRA, however it is hard for DEFRA to sustain the breadth of expertise, the influence or the manpower to undertake this role in relation to other departments. Its manpower and other resources are focused on achieving a number of important specific objectives over: farming, food, environmental protection, flooding and plant & animal health. Giving the Department a remit for everything for which all other parts of Whitehall are responsible – insofar as they apply to rural people and communities - whilst also having no specific objectives for any of them, leaves the Department a near impossible mission. The major management strands and resourcing of the Department's work are, as should be expected, focused on achieving the outcomes over which it has some control, not on the Rural Affairs element of its title over which it does not.

Example: If there were to be a genuine 'adviser' role and this were to be effective and cross-cutting throughout Whitehall it would have to have a clear mandate and 'line to power'. To do this it would either have to be rooted in the Cabinet Office or the Treasury, or alternatively have a compelling statutory backing. It would have to be resourced and respected for its role and its advice would need to have weight. A good example would be the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

18. At a local level the charitable nature of ACREnetwork members means that there is seldom much difference between being an advocate for rural areas and an adviser/watchdog. Most ACREnetwork members endeavour to achieve this but walk a difficult tightrope since the bulk of their income is derived from service provision or partnership based development work.

1.3 Watchdog

19. The CRC may originally have been perceived to have a 'watchdog' role. The closest the 2006 Act gets to this is to describe a responsibility for 'monitoring and making reports'. This role does not now exist anywhere and it is a moot point whether attempting to fulfil the 'monitoring and making reports' role of the CRC is what led to it being considered by some to be troublesome and ignored, then committed to the 'bonfire'. A watchdog needs teeth; Westminster has never

been willing, even during the CRC's short life, to give a rural watchdog a long enough lead or sharp enough teeth to enable it to be effective.

Examples: There was considerable evidence that the payment by results regime put in place through major prime contractors for the Work Programme was leading to rural clients being ignored because a tight payments regime meant a profit could not be made from them. The impact of payment by results may not have been easy to anticipate in advance through 'rural proofing', however an effective rural watchdog would have gathered together this evidence and addressed the issue when it came to light with the DWP. This did not happen.

One of the last actions of the CRC was to highlight the impact on rural 16 years olds of the ending of the Educational Maintenance Allowance, as this had been widely used to meet exceptional transport costs to post-16 education. No material policy change resulted from this intervention.

Question 2. Are sufficient measures being taken to ensure that policies are rural proofed?

20. No

21. However the question of what constitutes 'rural-proofing' needs to be examined to understand why this is both a particularly difficult issue for government and is also not the whole answer.

22. There sometimes appears to be a belief that failure to 'rural-proof' is an oversight and the simple application of a checklist carried out towards the end of a policy design process will overcome it. Alternatively, it is believed that reminding senior officials or Ministers of the need to think about rural areas will result in the application of a little more thought, and the problem will be solved. There are good reasons to think that neither of these are true, especially if the main emphasis is placed on processes within Whitehall rather than engagement of rural people and communities in delivery. These beliefs may also give some clues to the perception in many rural communities of being 'left behind'.

23. In the experience of the ACREnetwork, failure to 'rural-proof' is often a deliberate choice that is taken when budgets are tight, designers of a policy have little understanding of anything other than an urban context, or a desire to target resources in a way that is easy to communicate has triumphed over a good understanding of real community needs. Genuine rural proofing requires three difficult conditions to be met:

1. Policy makers must not only accept that delivery of almost all public goods to dispersed populations will cost more to achieve the same outcome than delivery to concentrated populations, but also that rural people have similar entitlements to urban people.
2. They further need to accept that decisions about how to make best use of the resources that have been allocated must be made as close to rural people as possible and services should be integrated together at the local level in order to achieve 'economies of scope' in rural areas. Commissioning services in narrow silos may achieve good value for money in urban areas but does not do so when population numbers are small.
3. Finally, policy makers must accept that ensuring services reach dispersed populations will not result in national PR opportunities as 'ownership' of delivery must be vested in local communities if it is to be sustained over time and supported by community involvement.

24. In our network's experience, few decision makers are willing to put these conditions in place since they run counter to the instincts and perceived interests of most government departments and their narrowly designed and targeted programmes. Much the same is true for politically led local government. So, in this context, it is not easy for anyone to take the lead on rural policy if the means of doing so is focused on an exhortation to 'rural proof' mainstream policies and programmes. Other approaches need to complement 'rural proofing' at the national policy level.
25. All the evidence from our network suggests that at local level there are few attempts being made to 'rural-proof' mainstream, locally designed, programmes. Where there is evidence of this taking place, it is mostly in places where rural is the mainstream e.g. Cornwall or Northumberland. However, for most of rural England, and for most public services, rural areas are administered as adjunct populations to larger urban areas. ACREnetwork members advocate for rural areas but, as local voluntary organisations, it has become increasingly hard to 'cut into' the policy thought process when the end result is inevitably a competitive public procurement exercise. The requirements of the procurement process seek to weed out any input from organisations with specific expertise that might subsequently be used to bid for delivery of a commissioned service. ACREnetwork members and their rural knowledge often fall into this category as they must fund their operations through service delivery. Alternatively procurement can be carried out on such a strategic scale that engaging communities as part of service delivery becomes barely possible.
26. At national level, despite efforts that have been made to find examples, it is hard to see any evidence of rural proofing filtering down to real changes in policy or approach to delivery. The most recent area of active policy making by government – the Industrial Strategy – shows some signs of 'agriculture proofing' but not of wider 'rural proofing'.

Question 3. Co-ordination of rural policy

27. In full, the questions posed by the Committee concern representation of the interests of rural communities to government and co-ordination of policy towards rural communities. In particular it seeks views on DEFRA's role. The question of whether government should, or currently does, have policies specifically to take account of the unique circumstances of rural communities is not asked. This unasked question does need to be addressed.
28. Government should, but currently does not, have a suite of specific policies towards rural communities that are distinct, but complementary to, its policies over the environment, food production, animal & plant health and water management. Is DEFRA the right department to 'own' these policies on behalf of government? This involves a difficult choice, as rural areas should be loathed to give up having Rural Affairs in the title of a mainstream Department. However, experience has shown that a 'hybrid' department with direct responsibility for some areas of policy and delivery finds it all but impossible also to carry an indirect, adviser, role over the delivery of all other areas of government policy. The respective responsibilities held by mainstream departments for the 25% of their 'clients' who live in rural areas and the 'special' department that can also be perceived as having an overarching responsibility for this section of the population has proven to be both confusing and hard to put into effect.

- 29. Despite the best efforts of a number of Ministers and senior officials since DEFRA's creation, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the responsibility for a broadly based policy towards rural areas, rural people, communities and businesses needs to lie elsewhere in government. It needs to be located somewhere where its real, cross-cutting, nature can be better and more powerfully exercised.**
30. Four key initiatives need to be taken at national government level if rural communities are to be properly represented in the policy, planning and delivery of public services and also services provided by the market. In summary these are:
- **Rural Policy**

Policy towards rural communities needs to be formed, and subsequently communicated to all Departments, at sufficiently senior a level in government that Departments cannot ignore it in the face of budgetary pressures. Although there is no direct equivalence, rural communities must be accorded the same level of respect and understanding as other sections of the population who are protected from discrimination that may result from a number of defined 'protected characteristics'. To be effective this must be at the heart of government i.e. the Treasury or the Cabinet Office.
 - **Market regulation**

The UK is a mixed market economy where public goods are often delivered through market mechanisms. It is essential that the statutory mechanisms put in place to regulate and ensure quality in the market for the benefit of the whole population (e.g. Ofcom, Ofgen, CQC etc.) are given a particular role in offsetting market abuse or market failure in respect of rural communities. Rural broadband is an important example, but far from being the only one. It is also important that this role of the regulators is, in turn, policed. To be effective this must relate closely to where oversight of these regulators is placed within government.
 - **Commissioning and practical intervention**

Rural proofing of individual policies alone is insufficient. A mechanism for comprehensively developing and pump priming local community led voluntary / social enterprise solutions to public service delivery in areas of low population is required. This will need a dedicated source of funds to be used on an 'invest to save' basis that can provide positive incentives for local commissioners to combine budgets to most effectively deliver services alongside rural communities. This approach could build on the previous experience of rural development agencies leveraging funds into rural services through modest grant interventions. Both a source of funds and an arms-length agency to manage them would need to be created as this will need to have a very strong understanding of service delivery in rural areas and long term objectives to improve collaboration between service commissioners.
 - **Understanding the rural dimension**

Officials within central and local government need to have an understanding of rural communities positively included in their core training and competencies. The ACREnetwork can both assist with this and help form a long term and positive partnership between government and rural communities. In this way the positive energy that can be found in many rural communities to find solutions to local, rural, issues of service delivery can be built on and factored into the formation of government policy.

31. Lord Cameron's review of rural proofing made an initial recommendation that the role of the Cabinet Office should be strengthened in relation to rural policy, albeit in a partnership with DEFRA Ministers. **We agree, but would go further and suggest that a Cabinet Office Unit should take on the role of rural policy formation and work to a Cabinet Committee on Rural Affairs.** This is the only institutional mechanism, short of re-creating a Standing Royal Commission, which will carry sufficient weight in government. From the creation of this Unit, Lord Cameron's other recommendations would logically flow and could be implemented. The Unit and Committee could take on responsibility for achieving the other proposals outlined above.
32. The long term relationship between the ACREnetwork and government would logically move from DEFRA to the proposed Cabinet Office Unit. If this is considered too executive a role to give such a Unit, an alternative would be the new Agency proposed above to invest in innovative service delivery models alongside rural people.
33. DEFRA's remit for the land based economy, environment and natural resources would be as subject to 'rural proofing' in relation to rural people and communities through the new Cabinet Office Unit as any other part of Whitehall. The emphasis, however, would be more focused on 'community proofing' DEFRA's policies towards the natural environment.

Question 10. The 2006 Act and Brexit

34. In so far as wider rural affairs and rural communities are concerned the structures put in place by the Act no longer exist. They cannot, therefore, be sufficient to prepare for rural policy after exit from the EU.
35. The institutions suggested in answer to Question 3. will give a reasonable chance to develop rural policies beyond those needed just for the environment and the land based economy.
36. It is imperative that a new Rural Policy for the UK is formed over the next few years and that this goes well beyond the current debate about how much resource can be retained in CAP like grant systems. A comprehensive Rural Policy is required, not separate policies for farming and for the environment that are, themselves, unconnected from urban derived policies on all other areas of concern to rural people and communities.
37. The priority for intervention in rural areas as the UK's exit from the EU unfolds has to be:
 - mitigation of the additional costs that arise if services are to be provided equitably to dispersed populations by both the public sector and the market,
 - use of any freedoms that arise from leaving the EU, eg over VAT, to improve the viability of rural services and rural community owned assets such as Village Halls and,
 - to ensure rural people and communities are not disadvantaged by the desire of the whole population – urban and rural – to protect the environment and make best use of the countryside's natural and man-made assets.

This submission has been written by Jeremy Leggett on behalf of ACREnetwork, August 2017

Historical Annex concerning Government and rural communities

Pre- 1997

38. For most of the twentieth century rural England was served by a Standing Royal Commission known as the Development Commission (DC). From the 1980s this operated under the title 'Rural Development Commission' (RDC). The DC had only an advisory role on socio-economic development throughout non-metropolitan England. Its original purposes derive from its creation in 1909 when rurality was synonymous with poverty, there was large scale population drift away from the land to the new suburbs and English farmers were struggling to cope with technological change and compete with cheaper food imports from the Empire.
39. In the 1960 the DC's role was widened to include social and community issues and in the 1980s it became a corporate body and could take action as well as advice government. The DC had established an agency initially known as the Council for Small Business in Rural Areas (CoSIRA) that provided generic business advice to small rural businesses and often supported them through the rapidly developing new Town and Country Planning process. Its new corporate existence enabled CoSIRA to be taken into the core structure of the RDC and renamed the RDC Business Service.
40. The RDC's social development remit was mainly pursued through a central core grant scheme for the network of County Rural Community Councils. By the mid-1980s there was one of these local organisations serving every one of England's shire Counties and providing a basic set of support services to village communities throughout England. The ACREnetwork is the national network of these organisations. Once it became a corporate body the RDC was moved under the newly created Department of the Environment (DoE) – the equivalent of the current Department for Communities and Local Government.
41. The first Rural White Paper was a joint initiative of MAFF and the DoE in the final years of the Conservative administration in the 1990s, but with substantial input from the RDC.

The Blair administration

42. In 1997 the new Labour government set about replicating in each of the English regions a version of the Development Agencies that existed in Wales and in the Highlands & Islands. Rather than find new money for this initiative the economic remit of the RDC was transferred to these Regional Development Agencies along with their staff, budgets and premises. The social remit of the RDC was amalgamated with the Countryside Commission to create a new Countryside Agency. It is possible that the conflict that often occurred at local level over economic development between the Countryside Commission's staff and that of the Rural Development Commission may have led to a belief that a forced marriage of this kind could help to achieve a single view about people's relationship with the countryside.
43. However, the early days of the new administration were coloured by two major rural events: outbreaks of foot and mouth disease and the passage of legislation to outlaw foxhunting. These two events had a strong influence on policy towards rural areas and were an essential context to a second Rural White Paper instigated by the then Deputy Prime Minister. The government created the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and moved some of the old Department of the Environment's sections into it, also placing the new Countryside Agency under its wing. The break between Government's oversight of local government and its policy towards rural communities was made at this point. This limited the inter-relationships over rural

policy and government's mainstream tasking of local government whilst also creating an advocacy role for rural issues within the Countryside Agency and linked to DEFRA.

44. All of government's policy towards rural areas – the natural environment, farming, plant and animal health, water, marine issues and flooding - now came either directly or indirectly under DEFRA. The remaining rural remit of the RDC, that which had been moved into the Countryside Agency, was probably better resourced than ever before, but with limited policy influence alongside the land-based priorities of DEFRA. The social remit consisted mainly of a reducing commitment to the practical work of Rural Community Councils but an increasing budget for research and innovation, especially into ways of working with rural communities that would contribute to the countryside management objectives of the Countryside Agency. The Chair of the CA was given the title 'Rural Advocate' reflecting the CA's intended role within Whitehall on behalf of rural areas.

The 2006 Act

45. The 2006 Act continued this trend of separating rural community issues within Whitehall and placing them away from mainstream policy formation or delivery whilst at the same time exhorting other Departments to 'rural-proof' their policies. The main aim of the Act appeared, at the time, to be consolidation of the responsibilities of English Nature with that of the Countryside Agency. The small social remit of the Countryside Agency did not fit well with this consolidation and so the government also created, under pressure from rural community organisations, the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC). The intention was to create a small government backed, but otherwise independent, NDPB that would be the government's 'rural conscience'. Its intervention was confined to research, publishing, facilitating discussion, encouraging others to 'rural proof' and, ultimately, commenting on rural issues and concerns from an independent standpoint. Its Chair inherited the role of Rural Advocate from the Chair of the Countryside Agency.
46. The role of providing government's ongoing commitment to support the network of Rural Community Councils was taken up by DEFRA directly and administered by their staff in the Government Offices of the Regions. When the Government Offices were closed, DEFRA struck an agreement with ACRE to cascade a national service agreement and grant to the 38 members of the ACREnetwork.
47. In the light of this historic context it was, perhaps, inevitable that following the 2010 General Election, in the 'bonfire of the Quangos', the final holder of the nation's rural conscience, the CRC, was itself wound up. Its role was absorbed into a unit wholly within DEFRA – the Rural Communities Policy Unit; a Unit that has, in turn, been wound up.
48. Prior to the 2015 General Election Lord Cameron, previously Chairman of the CA and Rural Advocate, was invited by government to review arrangements for 'rural proofing'. His report and recommendations bear re-reading. They focus primarily on Whitehall mechanisms that could, if carried out with vigour, enthusiasm and resource create more 'joined up' implementation of policies towards rural areas across government. However, the policies towards rural areas would have to exist, the enthusiasm would need political will and the resources would need to be allocated. None of these pre-conditions currently seem to apply.

Appendix - Evidence to Enquiry: Citizenship and Civic Engagement

Question 9. Why do so many communities and groups feel 'left behind'?

49. Opinion polls and other qualitative and anecdotal evidence suggest that the prevalence of a sense of being 'left behind' is not just a phenomenon of relatively deprived urban areas but is also very common amongst parts of the rural community. It may be possible to identify specific urban locations where this view is concentrated, in rural areas it is more diffuse and affects particular sections of the population in most rural communities.
50. Since the 2008 financial crisis, and the fiscal / public expenditure action that has been taken as a result, rural areas have seen dramatic economies being made in public services of all kinds. These have included health services, youth provision, library services, public transport etc. In all these services the tendency of those managing diminishing budgets has been to look at unit costs of delivery to individuals and families and seek to reduce services where either the unit cost is highest or the least visibly damaging cuts can be made. For public agencies that serve rural areas as well as urban ones, this has often meant cutting rural services first. For those living in rural areas it is not a matter of perceiving themselves as being left behind, they are being left behind and left out.
51. Government has seen community activity and volunteering as a means of ensuring that preventative services can be retained whilst budgets are protected for acute and emergency response services. This is evident across many areas of public service from the NHS to the Police Service. Rural communities are rightly proud of their tradition of resilience and self-sufficiency. Many feel this tradition has been abused and resources have been wasted in national initiatives where the bulk of the available money has not been used to support local activity but instead to build up new agencies and activity within local government departments. Many volunteers feel de-motivated by a tendency to be 'sucked-into' the public sector and their highly risk averse procedures. This tendency for 'top-down' direction from the public sector results in de-motivation of volunteers and is true across many areas, from health and wellbeing services to neighbourhood planning.
52. The Committee asks the question of how barriers to active citizenship can be overcome. In rural areas communities have always looked to themselves to provide some of those services and facilities that the state provides in urban areas. They understand that this is part of what it is to live in a rural area. What they find hard to understand is why the institutions of the state are so reluctant to understand, and take account of, the realities for people living in rural areas. The most frequent anxieties the ACREnetwork hear expressed by rural people when it comes to getting involved in their community are:
- excessive risk aversion and its resulting paperwork within the public sector;
 - systems that rely on fast broadband that they either cannot get or cannot afford;
 - national initiatives that are clearly designed only for major centres of population;
 - complex and expensive consultations over urban initiatives and a reluctance to listen to how decisions will impact rural people in their communities;
 - being treated as 'cattle fodder' for national citizenship initiatives that do not understand the commitment that individuals already make to their communities in rural areas.

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