

SHERBORNE & DISTRICT SOCIETY CPRE DINNER: 1 November 2019

Copy of talk given by Margaret Clark, CBE - A CPRE Trustee and Chair of both the Plunkett Foundation and The Rural Coalition.

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you this evening.

Peter (Neal) suggested that, rather than talk to you about the CPRE, where I'm aware that you all know an awful lot more than I do, I might say a bit about what I see as some of the key issues affecting rural areas at the moment and where I think we are in rural policy terms.

Before I come on to that, let me tell you a bit about me and how I came to be connected with CPRE.

I first came across CPRE when I worked for the government agency - the Rural Development Commission. The Commission was responsible for socio-economic development in the countryside and built small factories and workspace, supported small firms - mainly through a body called CoSIRA - and helped rural communities through grants to the county Rural Community Councils, village halls and later for rural housing and transport.

I would honestly say that, initially, CPRE was probably seen less as a friend and more a foe, as we often had differing views about development in the countryside and planning. But, over the years, as the RDC became part of the Countryside Agency and later the Commission for Rural Communities, we came to find more common ground, especially the interdependence of communities and the landscape, and how maintaining and enhancing the countryside is also dependent on, and benefits from, thriving rural communities and vice versa.

When I stood down from full-time work and I was invited to join CPRE's Policy Committee, I still wasn't sure I was an 'insider' rather than 'a critical friend'. But over the years I have been impressed by CPRE's work and capacity to tackle the big issues and, when I was later invited to become a member of the national board, I had no hesitation in becoming part of the family. I still have a particular interest in people and communities, rather than conservation and the natural environment, but I am convinced that they must be looked at together. If it's not unfashionable, I still believe in the 3 legs of sustainable development - economic, social and environmental.

So, what do I see as the key rural issues at the moment and where are we on rural policy? Well, I suspect the actual issues are much the same as they ever were: access to

affordable housing, jobs, services, education, training for those living and working in the countryside and pressures from visitors and externally-led development, about which you will all be very much aware. But, whether there has been much improvement in tackling the issues is hard to say.

Towards the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s, I think we were beginning to make some progress in raising the profile and understanding of rural issues and addressing some of the problems: those with long memories will remember we had 2 Rural White Papers - John Gummer's and John Prescott's - which took a broader view of rural than the previous emphasis on agriculture and had a more overarching and proactive approach to rural issues, recognising the need to counterbalance the urban bias in how policies were developed and applied.

These White Papers saw the birth of rural proofing, where government accepted the need to build in a rural dimension to policy development from its inception, even if the follow-through was not always successful. There was a recognition that rural economies were both diverse and dynamic, though heavily dependent on small and micro businesses which brought their own problems. At the same time, there was more of an understanding that living in the countryside was not a rural idyll for some and that there was poverty and disadvantage, often hidden and hard to identify. As one of my chairmen once said 'poverty doesn't come easier just because it's thatched'! Although, unfortunately, attempts to change the way deprivation was measured were unsuccessful - and to a certain extent still are.

The need for programmes which were specifically targeted at rural communities was also apparent and for a time we had a rural affordable housing programme, support for vital villages, help for rural transport and parish and village plans - the precursor of neighbourhood planning - alongside small-scale economic development to support local business. Of course, it wasn't all wonderful, but looking back, it was a step in the right direction.

Much of this changed as a result of the financial crisis. Inevitably, rural areas, like the rest of the country, have been affected by austerity but, because they started from a lower base and alternatives and choice are limited, the impact has often been greater. Funding for rural areas has never been fair or comparable to that in urban areas, but the disparities do seem to have grown. There have been major cut-backs in public services and public funding. Many of you will have seen a recent report from the Campaign for Better Transport showing that 3,000 local bus routes have been lost or reduced over the past decade and the deepest cuts in funding and routes has been in rural shire counties.

In the 6 years from 2010/11 to 2016/17, transport budgets in shire local authorities were cut by £80m or 40%.

Rural populations tend to be older and are ageing more rapidly, yet in 2017/18 rural residents funded 76% of the cost of adult social care compared to 53% in urban areas.

In the current year, urban areas received 66%, equivalent to £119 per head, more in the local government grant settlement than their rural counterparts. Rural residents pay on average over 20% (nearly £100) per head more in Council Tax than their urban counterparts.

The lack of affordable housing in rural areas has reached a critical level. Only 8% of households in villages live in social housing compared to 19% in urban areas. Average house prices are £44,000 higher than in urban areas and in some areas the cheapest house prices are over 8 times greater than the lower quartile annual earnings. I am pleased that CPRE have been at the forefront of championing the need for more, good quality affordable housing.

Of course, it isn't just publicly funded services that have been affected. The drive for greater efficiencies, centralisation of services and responses to changing consumer habits have led to the closures of banks, shops, pubs and other local services.

On the other hand, some developments, like the growth of online shopping and home delivery, have provided better opportunities for those in rural areas and have overcome some of the problems of accessibility. Although the consequential increase in goods transport has caused problems in some places.

At the same time, rural economies continue to demonstrate their diversity. There are nearly 5 and a half million registered businesses based in rural areas, with an annual turnover of £434bn and, while land-based businesses are important, over 85% of rural businesses are from other sectors. They face all the problems of attracting skilled labour and access to finance, premises and training. Local Enterprise Partnerships are a mixed bag and rural needs do not always get their attention.

However, rural communities are resilient and many have responded to the challenges they face. At the Plunkett Foundation, which champions and supports community business, we have seen an increasing number of communities coming together to buy and run local services, not just the traditional community shops, but increasingly, pubs, woodlands, community cafes and even a distillery!

Connectivity is another critical area. Poor mobile and broadband coverage has been a major issue, especially as more and more business has to be done electronically. Rural areas have certainly been at the end of the line, both literally and figuratively and, although there have been some welcome announcements recently about the rollout of full fibre broadband and on improving mobile phone coverage, the response to rural issues generally has tended to be piecemeal at best and ignored at worst.

Part of the problem is that, by their nature, rural areas are a long way from the centre; most policy is urban-centric and the perception of rural which is seen as mostly about agriculture, a bit of a backwater or a rather cosy world where everyone looks after each other.

Urban considerations continue to dominate policy making and there is a real lack of understanding about the impacts on rural areas and communities of those policies.

No-one living in a rural area expects to have everything on their doorstep and most recognise that we are privileged to live in a beautiful and special environment. There are many upsides to living in the countryside but, at the same time, I have been to several meetings recently where there is a growing frustration that rural is not getting a fair deal and that people and communities are beavering away to help themselves without much support or recognition.

Since 2016 I have been the chair of the Rural Coalition, which was established in 2007 under the chairmanship of Lord Matthew Taylor. It is an alliance of 13 national organisations, including CPRE, the NFU, CLA, National Housing Federation, RICS, the Church, TCPA and others, who all have their own perspectives and responsibilities, but who have come together with a shared vision of a living and working countryside. In 2017 we published a policy statement, setting out the key principles which we believed should underline policy making and the policy priorities and actions needed to implement them.

Our 4 policy principles were:

- That Brexit discussions must recognise that 'rural' is more than agriculture and the natural environment (important though they both are)
- That all Brexit discussions and post-Brexit policies must be rural proofed
- That policies and funding must deliver a fair deal for rural communities
- That decision-making, funding and delivery must be devolved and involve rural communities.

Since then, there has been a growing view that something more is needed; that there is an overreliance on rural proofing as the primary means to deliver better rural policies. Yet,

there is strong evidence that rural proofing is not working consistently across government and that Defra, who are charged with ensuring this happens, does not have the capacity to do so. Their agenda is dominated by agriculture and the environment and the rural communities' part of the brief inevitably gets squeezed. Rural proofing in other departments is patchy. Some like the review of local government finance in MHCLG have taken rural on board and yet housing and planning sit in the same department and, although I am sure they would disagree, neither of those policies properly take account of the rural dimension.

That is why, more recently, there has been a desire for a more strategic approach and a demand for a comprehensive, long term, properly funded, rural strategy, which would set the context and framework for rural policy and delivery across government.

The need for such a strategy was strongly endorsed in the report by the House of Lords Select Committee on the Rural Economy, chaired by Lord Foster and published earlier this year, to which many of us engaged in the rural world gave evidence. I am sorry that the Government, in its response to the report, rejected the idea of a strategy, mainly on the grounds that it is best to 'embed an appreciation of rural issues at all levels of delivery' - rather than "risk rural areas being placed in a silo through having a single rural strategy".

My concern is that the continuing emphasis on agriculture and the environment without looking at rural in the round and the impacts on rural communities and economies risks ignoring a major part of rural life - creating its own silo.

Ministers, I know, attach a great deal of importance to rural proofing. Lord Gardiner, the Rural Affairs Minister, is very committed to trying to make it work. I have heard rural proofing called 'a busted flush' but I still believe it has merit; but it needs a context and it needs to be more transparent and accountable. As I said in my evidence to the Select Committee: it needs some welly! A comprehensive rural strategy would give the political clout that its needed. I worked on both the previous Rural White Papers and for all the warts they did bring in departments across Whitehall and give rural some political backing.

Meanwhile, there is a real sense of a policy vacuum which other bodies are trying to fill. CPRE itself is developing a 21st Century Vision for Rural England and is focussing on many of the issues I have highlighted.

Of course, it is not all gloom and doom. There have been some positives. For the first time I can remember, a number of rural bodies, including the Rural Coalition, were brought into discussions with the Chief Secretary at the Treasury about a rural dimension to the Comprehensive Spending Review. Unfortunately, the then Chief Secretary, Liz

Truss was moved to another Department and the Spending Review is in limbo, but it's a start!

More recently, the rural voice has been heard loud and clear by Barclays, who have had to overturn their decision on stopping cash withdrawals at post offices. And there have been positive announcements about future funding for local authorities and schools.

I am also encouraged by the amount of local initiatives. Communities are rising to the challenge, filling gaps and developing new ways of doing things, as well as delivering local services. North Yorkshire County Council has just set up an independent Rural Commission, chaired by the Dean of Ripon, to examine the key issues and challenges and to find new ways to create opportunities to save some of the county's most rural communities from decline. Essex County Council is currently reviewing its rural strategy.

What I keep hearing, however, is the frustration at the difficulty of being able to learn and share from each other and the lack of a coherent strategic approach nationally which recognises and enables local diversity.

There are, of course, other big and important issues and major challenges facing the countryside, not least the climate emergency, which I have deliberately not talked about. Your expertise in these areas is likely to be much greater than mine and I fear, in any case, that I have already spent too much time teaching most of you how to suck eggs.

We are all facing tremendous pressures and an uncertain future. We have a General Election in a few weeks' time. How many Party manifestos or Parliamentary candidates will address rural issues specifically? We need a strong rural voice to make sure that rural areas are not overlooked, sidelined or treated as an afterthought.

A new government, of whatever complexion, is an opportunity to get rural on the agenda and to reinforce the message that rural communities and the countryside have tremendous potential and make an important contribution both to our economy and our health and well-being.