



House of Commons
Environment, Food and Rural
Affairs Committee

The Delivery of Education in Rural Areas: Government Reply to the Committee's Report

Tenth Special Report

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The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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TENTH SPECIAL REPORT

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee reported to the House on *The Delivery of Education in Rural Areas* in its Ninth Report of Session 2002–03, published on 5 June 2003 as HC 467. The Government's Reply to the Report was received on 8 August 2003.

Government response

Introduction

The Government welcomes the Committee's report and its interest in rural education delivery. The Committee has identified a number of key areas where good work is already being done, and others that demand more attention. However, it is felt the committee has misunderstood Defra's role, and failed to appreciate the depth of the work that is being done at both the national and the local level. Defra's role is to look at the particular interests of rural areas, and to represent and promote those interests to the relevant lead Department or Agency – in this case the Department for Education and Skills - to ensure that delivery is as good as it can be in rural areas. While “rural proofing” (in the sense of a check list of matters to be considered when developing mainstream policy) remains relevant, we have moved beyond that to a partnership approach. The Secretary of State, Rt Hon Charles Clarke, meets the Rural Affairs Minister, Rt Hon Alun Michael, regularly to focus on rural delivery of education and skills, and their meetings are followed through by a joint working group of officials. Since the day that Defra was established Defra Ministers have stressed again and again that it would undermine rural delivery rather than strengthening it were policy for education and skills – or planning policy or housing or transport or health – to be divorced from the mainstream. Such an approach would treat “rural” as a separate place whereas Defra's work to date has shown the variety of rural communities and economies, with a whole range of strengths, needs and weaknesses, some of which relate to their remoteness or their proximity to towns and cities. Rather than increasing the urban-rural divide, the purpose of rural policy is to encourage joined-up government, in which the specific needs and problems of rural communities are addressed. That is why Defra's approach to rural affairs is essentially a partnership approach rather than an attempt to take over the responsibilities that rightly lie with other Departments.

Transport

Recommendation 1: We recommend that the internal review of statutory walking distances be extended to a public consultation with a deadline for implementation of a new system. We urge the Government to overhaul radically the current arrangements. A new system should be based on an assessment of safety issues and the real alternatives to walking and not just crudely based on distance from school.

Defra and DfES should ensure that the particular needs of rural areas are taken into account. (Paragraph 16)

The Government has been reviewing all aspects of school transport. The public will in due course be given the opportunity of commenting on any changes to the law which may arise from this work. On the specific issue of safety, Local Education Authorities already have power to provide transport where walking routes are deemed unsafe.

Recommendation 2: There is clearly scope for innovation in the area of home-to-school transport. Given this, we were disappointed by Defra's relative lack of involvement in finding solutions. We were also surprised that the Countryside Agency's recent report on Transport in Tomorrow's Countryside makes little reference to education transport. We believe that Defra should be involved at a local level with LEAs to bring together resources and implement innovative transport schemes which, where successful, can be replicated in different parts of the country. Defra should identify and fund solutions which would meet the needs of families in rural communities. The aim of these schemes should be to reduce reliance on cars and enable all school pupils to take part in out-of-school activities. (Paragraph 19)

In fact, both Defra and the Countryside Agency have identified transport as a central concern for rural communities. That is why Defra is working closely with the Department for Education and Skills and the Department for Transport to look at ways to forge closer links between community and school transport. The piloting of alternative home-to-school approaches was also highlighted by the Social Exclusion Unit report 'Making the connections'. There are Defra officials on the implementation steering group to ensure the rural interest is reflected. Local Education Authorities already have discretionary power to consider piloting changes to home-to-school transport entitlement from their own funds. An alternative method of funding pilots would be by setting and achieving Local Public Service Agreements targets.

The Countryside Agency has been active in supporting schemes that promote walking and cycling to school as well as schemes which aim to increase access to after school activities. Examples of funding include Maynards Green Community Primary School, East Sussex, which provided bicycle racks for 50 bicycles. It has involved the reinstatement of a pathway to access the school site and secure storage for bicycles and helmets. The Sedbergh Walking Bus, Cumbria project set up a walking bus which comprises of three volunteer parents who act as 'driver' and 'conductor' to escort a line of children to school. The 'bus' travels along a set route collecting children at 'bus stops' along the way. The project included recruiting volunteers, providing equipment, publicity for the project and carrying out risk assessments. The Agency is also involved with the piloting of Yellow bus schemes in Hebdon Bridge and Runnymede. And the community transport schemes that have been supported include ones on which school-based transport is integrated with vehicles that serve other purposes in the community.

Recommendation 3: Defra should examine the lessons of the Wheels to Work Scheme and fund a similar scheme which would develop innovative transport solutions for post-16 students in isolated rural areas.(Paragraph 22)

The Government is very supportive of the Wheels to Work initiative. It is an inventive approach which has successfully helped students aged 16-19 to access and complete further education and enter employment. Similar aspects of the scheme have already been developed and tested in some areas using funds from the Transport Development Pathfinders, such as moped and bicycle loan schemes.

Recommendation 4: We welcome the steps that the Government has taken to improve transport provision for the 16-19 age group. We particularly welcome the national extension of the Education Maintenance Allowance and believe that, when introduced, the allowance will help students in rural areas with the additional costs of travel to school and college. (Paragraph 23)

The Government welcomes the Committee's recognition that Education Maintenance Allowances will have a key role to play in helping young people in rural areas with costs of travelling to school or college. Evidence from the pilot evaluations actually shows that providing support with transport costs as part of the Educational Maintenance Allowance is not the most effective way to increase participation. We have therefore decided to separate the national Educational Maintenance Allowance scheme from transport support to enable the latter to reflect local needs more closely.

Recommendation 5: Defra has a key role in monitoring the effect of the various government initiatives and pilot projects to help post-16 students attend school and college. We recommend that Defra publish examples of good practice by LEAs in rural areas, and also identify those LEAs where students are prevented from attending school and college because of poor transport provision. (Paragraph 23)

Defra does not lead on transport or education issues. However Defra and the Countryside Agency work closely with Department for Education and Skills and Department for Transport to rural-proof transport and education policy to ensure rural areas are not adversely affected. We have been closely involved in the Countryside Agency's review of Wheels to Work, funded through its Vital Villages programme. This is a major initiative to support access to training and education in rural areas. A good practice guide "Two Wheels Work" was published in July 2002 which gives case studies and examples of good practice. It is available on the Countryside Agency website, www.countryside.gov.uk

The Government is publishing a Good Practice Brochure featuring 12 of the most successful Transport Development Pathfinders, and references to 4 exemplary Local Education Authority Transport Policy Statements. It will be published in September 2003 and disseminated to all Local Education Authority-led Transport Partnerships to assist in the development of improved transport services and support. The Brochure will

also be available on the Department for Education and Skills Transport Website at www.dfes.gov.uk/16-19transport, and Local Education Authorities also have the option to submit their own examples of good practice for inclusion on the site.

A comprehensive evaluation of Department for Education and Skills' transport policy for further education students ages 16-19 will assess its effectiveness in increasing access and participation levels. This includes a comprehensive survey of all Local Education Authorities, and ten in-depth case studies, including some rural areas. The evaluation will report in November 2004, but findings will be cascaded to all Local Education Authority-led partnerships and made available on the website as they emerge.

Information and Communications Technology

Recommendation 6: We welcome the Government's commitment to ensuring all schools have a broadband connection by 2006. We also welcome the fact that many witnesses believe that this target will be met. We recommend that the DfES publish regular updates showing progress towards the target. It should ensure that separate figures for urban and rural areas are collected and published. (Paragraph 28)

The Government currently publishes regular updates towards the broadband 2006 target, although the data reports the percentage of secondary and primary schools connected rather than the urban and rural split. Following discussions with the Countryside Agency, the Department for Education Skills has agreed to contact the Regional Broadband Consortia with a view to providing a rural/urban split. The Regional Broadband Consortia that have been contacted so far have indicated it should be possible to provide this data, sourced from their member Local Education Authorities, although it may take some time. At present though it is unclear as to whether there are cost implications of this data collection exercise. If they were significant, it may mean the exercise would fail. However, the Department for Education and Skills hopes to be able to provide the percentage of rural schools connected by October 2003, with a view of providing an update annually.

Recommendation 7: We recommend that an assessment be made of the additional costs of providing good IT systems in rural schools. Defra should take the lead in assessing whether the additional money for rural schools made available through the sparsity factor adequately reflects these additional costs, and should publish its findings. (Paragraph 28)

In 2002 the Department for Education and Skills reviewed the broadband funding allocations against costs in different geographical areas and found that the sparsity weighting used provided the most equitable way to allocate the given funding and was the best measure of actual cost.

The Department is currently reviewing all information, communication and technology elements in Schools Standards Fund grants including any rural factors, and the formula

for the broadband grant will be reconsidered as part of this process. In addition we are reviewing the procurement process to ensure we get best value connectivity for schools throughout England, particularly those in rural areas. The way in which broadband procurement is in turn funded may also be reviewed as a result.

Defra has no evidence to suggest that there are additional costs in providing good IT systems in rural schools, and is not in a position to undertake such an assessment itself. It will ask the Department for Education and Skills for data from its review of School Standards Fund grants and take appropriate action if any is required in co-operation with DfES.

Recommendation 8: We recommend that the DfES consider the extent to which satellite broadband technology can increase the rate at which rural schools are being provided with a broadband connection. We also recommend that the Government assess how broadband connections to rural schools might be exploited by the rural community more generally. (Paragraph 29)

The Regional Broadband Consortia Technical Group has a special interest group looking at satellite technology. Several Regional Broadband Consortia are piloting the use of satellite in providing connectivity to harder to reach schools. One draw-back of this solution is that satellite-based services suffer from delay making them unsuitable for some real-time content. Satellite is not the only technology which can be used to connect rural schools - radio for example is being used in some areas and there are developments in the available technology all the time.

The Government is already looking at ways in which broadband in schools may be of benefit to the wider community. A cross-Government group is investigating how broadband may be aggregated across the public sector with a view to bringing costs down for schools and encouraging telecom companies to make the necessary investments required to bring the technology into more rural areas. DEFRA and DfES are both represented on the Ministerial group as well as the official working group.

The Extended Schools project has published guidance and advice for schools and Local Education Authorities around providing a range of services and activities outside of the school day to help meet the needs of its pupils, their families and the wider community. Information and Communications Technology is one such service and officials are currently determining the implications of opening up schools' broadband networks for use outside of school hours for other users.

Recommendation 9: Defra should be taking a lead role in monitoring the implementation of broadband in rural schools and the opportunities this offers to rural communities. Again we are disappointed that its role appears to be largely tangential. (Paragraph 30)

Defra is indeed monitoring the roll out of broadband to schools through the Rural Services Standard and the work of the Rural Education Taskforce. As well as working with DfES, Defra is working at Ministerial and official level with the Department of Trade and Industry and with Rural Development Agencies to promote access to broadband. Defra and DTI Ministers recently undertook joint visits to promote this work. A Defra official is currently seconded to the DTI as part of their team on rural broadband, while another Defra official is currently working part-time with a Regional Development Agency to feed first-hand experience of rural broadband into the work of Defra and its partners.

The Rural Education Taskforce will be looking at the first rural/urban data analysis, provided by the Department for Education and Skills (as stated in our response to recommendation 6), at a future meeting. Any action that may need to be taken in respect of the implementation of this programme, will be then follow.

The 2003 Rural Services Standard was published on 14 July and restates the Government's commitment to the roll out of broadband in rural areas.

Defra is fully aware of the opportunities that broadband facilities in rural schools can provide to the local community. Defra has supported the Department for Education and Skills in its work on the Extended Schools programme because of the opportunities that this will provide, not only for broadband access, but also for many other educational activities and community events.

Supporting and enhancing schools

Recommendation 10: We urge the Government to continue to provide grants to LEAs which support collaborative projects between small schools. The potential benefits of clustering should be explored as widely as possible across the age and ability range. The Government should support clustering and publicise examples of good practice from LEAs. (Paragraph 32)

The Standards Fund for 2003-4 contains a grant at £268m (Grant 508a) to contribute to the salaries of support staff and to help small schools, and a further grant of £37.45m (Grant 508b) to contribute to the training and development of support staff and to support shared approaches between small schools.

The Secretary of State has now announced the changes we propose to make to restore stability to school funding in 2004-05 and 2005-06. These proposals will address the concerns of schools about this year's arrangements by guaranteeing every school at least a minimum increase in funding per pupil; giving head teachers more time to plan their budgets by bringing forward the dates of key announcements on, for example, the local government settlement; and reversing next year's planned cuts to the Standards Fund and inflation proofing it by providing more than £400 million in 2004-05 and in 2005-

06. Guidance will be agreed to underpin the operation of these new arrangements, in order, for instance, to take proper account of the extra protection that LEAs already provide to small schools.

Examples of how schools have developed clustering arrangements and shared good practice can be found on the TeacherNet website - www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/resourcesfinanceandbuilding/funding/smallschoolsfund

Recommendation 11: We do not believe there is any substantiated evidence that small rural schools necessarily offer either a better or worse standard of education than larger urban ones. Generalisations about the relative performance of small and large schools should therefore be avoided. (Paragraph 33)

Small schools are not included in the additional comparative analyses provided to the press at the time of publication of league tables. Threshold indicators (percentage level 4+ and percentage level 5+) are not published for schools with fewer than 11 pupils at the end of Key Stage 2.

Tables provide a reliable and easily accessible source of comparative information. They help focus the debate on standards through provision of hard information on achievements, thus strengthening the accountability of schools, colleges and Local Education Authorities. The tables provide a true picture of a school's results but, in the case of small schools, there are issues about the year on year results as there is often a more complex picture beneath the test data.

Feedback from this year's primary performance table conferences shows that small schools want their results published. The concerns that schools with small cohorts are never afforded the opportunity to celebrate success is being addressed through the current performance tables annual consultation.

Recommendation 12: We welcome the Government's policy of a presumption against closure of rural schools and the associated fall in the number of rural schools which have closed. (Paragraph 35)

The Government welcomes the Committee's recognition of the success of the policy of a presumption against closure of rural schools. Defra has been working closely with Department for Education and Skills to include the policy in the 2003 Rural Services Standard, published on 14 July this year. This restates the Government's commitment to retain this presumption.

Recommendation 13: Defra should take the lead in ensuring that there is consistency in government policies related to rural schools. We recommend that Defra work with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to revise the best value framework so that LEAs do not face pressure to reduce surplus places by closing small, rural schools that are viable. (Paragraph 37)

Whilst the best value framework encourages Local Education Authorities to manage their surplus places effectively, the Government does not accept that this increases pressure on them to close small schools. Surplus places can be removed by variety of means including removing temporary classrooms or by allowing the surplus space to be used by the wider community under the Extended School initiative.

Recommendation 14: We agree that decisions about whether small rural schools remain viable should be based primarily on educational considerations and policy should be led by DfES. Nevertheless, Defra should play a role in dealing with the effects of closure on rural communities. We recommend that Defra work closely with LEAs to monitor school rolls in rural areas and publish a report identifying those areas most at risk. Defra should work with the relevant LEAs and the DfES over decisions about school closures, provide assistance, where appropriate, to maintain village schools, and work with local authorities to support communities where schools are closed. (Paragraph 39)

Statutory responsibility for deciding school closures rests with the local School Organisation Committee or Schools Adjudicator. Neither the Department for Education and Skills or Defra have the right to intervene in individual cases.

Defra and the Countryside Agency recognise the additional benefits that schools can provide to their local community, such as after school clubs, information technology or community learning centre. They are working with the Department for Education and Skills to see if these factors can be included in the consideration by School Organisation Committees and School Adjudicators when deciding on school closures.

Recommendation 15: We welcome the extended schools initiative and support the Government's vision of the rural school as the hub of the local community. We are also reassured by the fact that of the 25 Pathfinder projects, six are based in rural areas: Cambridgeshire, Cornwall, Durham, Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Northumberland. We remain concerned, however, that the use of the deprivation index to identify the most disadvantaged areas for future funding may limit the extent to which the initiative reaches rural areas. (Paragraph 41)

All Local Education Authorities, urban and rural, will receive funding for both full service extended schools and for extended school co-ordinators and managers over the next three years. Initially this will be concentrated in the most disadvantaged areas but by 2006 will cover all Local Education Authorities. This year's Rural Services Standard states that by 2006 all rural Local Education Authorities will have at least one full service

extended school, which will offer a core of services including health and social care, childcare, study support, adult education and family learning, information, communication and technology access, and arts and sports facilities.

In choosing the Local Education Authorities to receive funding for extended school coordinators and managers in the first two years the Neighbourhood Renewal indices were used of multiple deprivation and the Neighbourhood Renewal access to services indices to select urban and rural Local Education Authorities. As a result of this, a quarter of the Local Education Authorities that will receive funding in those years are in rural areas.

Although Defra is pleased that the Extended Schools programme is being rolled out first to those areas in most need, recent evidence suggests that there are rural communities on the periphery, that fall just below the cut off point for being included in the deprivation index, and may miss out on the opportunity to provide services that can improve social inclusion. Defra will work with the Department for Education and Skills to try and ensure that these communities are identified and given due consideration when future funds are released for this programme.

Recommendation 16: We urge the Government to consider the needs of rural areas carefully as it prepares the extended schools policy and to ensure that rurality is a positive criterion for qualifying for available funds. (Paragraph 41)

The Government will support all Local Education Authorities and schools to plan, set up and manage extended services. The policy covers both urban and rural areas, and has no particular emphasis on either. The Government recognises, of course, that there may be particular issues for rural schools and Defra works closely with the Department for Education and Skills to ensure that rural issues are covered adequately in the development of the extended schools network, and as mentioned above, there is a commitment to have a full service extended school in each rural Local Education Authority by 2006.

Through extended schools the aim is to provide greater and better access to services, and in some locations, particularly rural areas, the school may be the only place that can provide the local community with sports and other facilities, and the benefits may therefore be greater in rural areas. In selecting the Local Education Authorities to run extended school pathfinders we ensured that a number of these were in rural areas, and the evaluation will, amongst other things, look closely at issues of particular relevance to rural areas. As programme funding is rolled out over the next three years, all Local Education Authorities, urban and rural, will receive support.

Further Education

Recommendation 17: We recommend that the Government fund a number of projects in rural areas which seek to enhance the role of further education colleges within the local community. The Government should learn the lessons of such

projects and consider broadening the scope of its extended schools initiative to facilitate an enhanced community role for further education colleges in rural areas. (Paragraph 43)

Further Education Colleges in rural areas play a key role in the development of their local communities offering learning and social opportunities both on and off site. The Government will consider these proposals in the context of work underway between the Department for Education and Skills, Defra, the Learning and Skills Council and the Countryside Agency to increase participation and attainment in post 16 learning and will also ask the Learning and Skills Council to look at this in the context of their work on wider rural and sustainable development issues.

Defra is currently conducting a review of learning, skills and knowledge and, as part of this review, the land-based college network, which includes rural Further Education Colleges, has been identified as having a key role in the delivery of skills to rural businesses, especially for actual and potential new entrants to farming and other allied industries. Defra will be working with NAPAEO – the association of land-based colleges and universities – to improve communications between Defra and the college network, to identify how Defra and the colleges might work together, and to ensure recognition of the colleges within government as an integral part of the rural business support network. The roles of the colleges will be considered further as part of the review's work on the specialised learning needs of specific rural business sectors, which will report at the end of 2003.

Recommendation 18: We recommend that Defra establish mechanisms by which local Learning and Skills Councils, LEAs and providers co-ordinate their work to ensure that the educational needs of rural communities and the rural economy are being met. Particular attention should be paid to enhancing co-operation between school sixth forms and further education colleges so that students in rural areas can be provided with a wide range of educational opportunities. (Paragraph 45)

Defra has significant contact with Learning and Skills Councils, both directly through regional Rural Director membership on the Boards of many local Learning and Skills Councils, and indirectly through work with other Government Office colleagues, represented on the Board of all Learning and Skills Councils across the regions. For example, in the South West, Defra has worked hard to influence Learning and Skills Councils to ensure they adequately reflect the particular delivery needs of rural areas in their plans – the Learning and Skills Councils now address rural access issues automatically. In addition, the delivery of Defra's PSA target for rural post-16 education has been discussed in detail with all the region's Learning and Skills Councils. Government Office South West is working with Learning and Skills Councils and other partners on infrastructure for post-16 learning, as outlined in the recently published Department for Education and Skills 'Success for All' strategy.

Learning and Skills Councils are undertaking Strategic Area Reviews to assess the pattern of provision for post-16 education. The Government Office rural teams will be involved with this. Work began in April 2003 and the first round will be complete by early 2005. Strategic Area Reviews are a fundamental assessment of the provision needed in each part of the country. As part of the process, the Learning and Skills Council will identify and rationalise patterns of provision where standards are low or where there is wasteful duplication, choice is inhibited or collaborative working discouraged. It will also mean finding the best balance between extending learner choice, specialisation, collaboration and co-ordination within the provider network in each area.

In rural areas this will mean ensuring that the right mix of provision exists to meet the educational and economic needs of the community including access to provision and collaboration between providers including further education colleges and school sixth forms.

In addition to the reviews, Defra is working with the Learning and Skills Council national office through its work on the education strand of its rural Public Service Agreement. Defra's Rural Teams in the Government Offices for the Regions, are engaged fully with their local Learning and Skills Council, and Local Education Authorities, to help them co-ordinate their work to ensure that the educational needs of rural communities and the rural economy are being met. In fact the Government Offices for the Regions are represented on all the local Learning and Skills Council boards.

Recommendation 19: We believe it is indefensible that there are no published figures on take-up and retention of students on courses of further education and training, broken down by rural and urban areas. This is despite the fact that Defra's Service Delivery Agreement contains a target to "increase the proportion of 16 and 17 year olds living in rural areas taking up further education and training through the programmes of Learning and Skills Councils". Defra should publish the current position, indicate what it intends to do to improve participation and retention rates in rural areas, and state by what date it expects to see a demonstrable improvement. (Paragraph 46)

Recent developments in education statistics, including the introduction of the Pupil Level Annual School Census, provide the means to produce national estimates of participation and retention rates for young people in rural and in urban areas. It will also be possible to disaggregate the retention rates to much lower geographical levels and we are now able to start to collate and analyse this data. There are difficulties in producing participation rates at local levels as the detailed population data required is not sufficiently reliable. We will be investigating the extent to which participation rates can be estimated for sub-national rural areas.

As part of Defra's Public Service Agreement to improve access to post 16 education in rural areas, it is engaging with stakeholders to identify the problems of access to training

and development for both school leavers looking to take up further education courses, and for employees looking for training to improve their skills. Defra is at present undertaking research to identify access barriers, and when this is completed it will try and provide solutions to those access problems in conjunction with stakeholders.

Recommendation 20: We recommend that the Learning and Skills Council and Defra work together to assess the extent of any correlation between sparsity and the costs of providing further education and training. Defra should ensure that there is a clear definition of rurality for this purpose, based on the work currently being carried out by the Countryside Agency, and, if necessary, collect sufficient data to complete the analysis. (Paragraph 48)

Defra, the Department for Education and Skills and the Learning and Skills Council are already working together to examine the extent of correlation between sparsity and cost of learning, and sparsity and attainment. This work will be further informed by related reviews that are also being undertaken.

With respect to the inter-departmental project to develop a new, improved standard urban/rural definition, Defra is and is working with others across government to ensure that this definition is quickly and widely applied. This new definition should be available in Autumn 2003.

Joined-up government

Recommendation 21: We urge the DfES to continue to encourage the establishment of Sure Start programmes in rural areas. (Paragraph 52)

Defra regards the Sure Start programme as an exemplar of how to recognise the needs of rural areas and provide a good service to them while recognising and focussing on the large concentrations of need in urban areas. Ministers and officials alike have recognised that children have similar needs, but that delivery has to be different when they are dispersed in a rural community.

All the 524 planned Sure Start local programmes will be up and running by late summer 2003. Of those 15 programmes are sited in recognisably rural areas. A further 29 'mini' Sure Starts are in rural areas. This pilot was set up to deliver better integration of children's services in areas with quite small pockets of deprivation either in rural areas or in urban areas with small numbers of families living in poverty. The mini Sure Starts are managed through Local Authority Early Years and Childcare Development Partnerships and linked to Neighbourhood Nurseries or other existing provision. They are delivering Sure Start type services to around 150 to 170 children under 4 in each catchment area.

A network of children's centres is now being established in disadvantaged areas providing good quality childcare with early education, family and health services, and

training and employment advice, for at least 650,000 children and their families. The centres will build on existing programmes like Sure Start local programmes, Neighbourhood Nurseries and Early Excellence Centres, bringing high quality integrated services to the heart of communities.

The Government recognises that the children's centre model will need adaptation for rural areas, and will be actively encouraging local authorities with rural areas to include these in their planning. The Government will give flexibility to authorities to plan for the particular needs of these areas and recognises the higher unit costs for centres that will serve them.

Recommendation 22: We recommend that the DfES commission research into problems of social exclusion, special educational needs and non-attendance in rural areas. (Paragraph 53)

The Government's approach to social exclusion is to tackle problems wherever they occur. The Government recognises the need to focus on targeting the interlocking problems of the most deprived areas, including rural areas.

The Government recently announced a new Special Educational Needs Programme of Action, to run over the next 10 years. The programme aims to ensure that all children (including those who live in rural areas) with Special Educational Needs will have an education that enables them to realise their potential and where there are barriers to learning and participation, every effort will be made to overcome them. The 5 strands within the programme ('Intervening Early', 'Improving Access and Raising Attainment', 'Moving Between Schools and Beyond Schools', 'Joining Up Services for Children with Complex Needs', and 'Rewarding Success, Challenging Poor Practice and Supporting Improvement') will allow the Government to target action at current gaps within policy and services. Within the programme, research will be conducted into low incidence provision on a region-by-region basis. The intention to manage rural issues as an element of the wider action programme.

The Department for Education and Skills already has geographical markers on the majority of its key data sets which allow a rural analysis to be made. Through its work in support of Better Information for Small Areas and the Neighbourhood Renewal agenda it is looking to improve the quality, usefulness and accessibility of the local information from these datasets. Where appropriate the Government will develop other datasets to provide localised information. In addition, there are a number of research and evaluation projects which have provided, or will be providing in the future, information on social inclusion in rural areas through looking at particular initiatives. Examples are:

- What Works extension project: exploring the impact of rurality in pathfinder areas, published in August 2002. This project explores whether the characteristics of rural areas have an impact on the take up of training;
- Geography, Resources and Primary School Performance, an empirical

exploration of the relationship between primary school performance and social and economic disadvantage of pupil intake and local community, published in June 2002;

- a joint evaluation commissioned with the Countryside Agency to assess the effectiveness of Capital Modernisation Funded UK online centres in rural areas. The report, due for publication in September 2003, will provide national statistics and analysis that illustrate how well the centres have succeeded in meeting the needs of rural communities. It will also contain a case study-based guide that will be disseminated to other rural projects with the aim of sharing good practice.

The Government recently announced a behaviour and attendance strategy through which every Local Education Authority is being funded to appoint behaviour and attendance consultants to offer support to secondary schools. This includes access to behaviour and attendance audit material; behaviour and attendance training for senior managers which will support behaviour and attendance audits, policies and action plans.

In addition to this universal action the Government is providing targeted support with Attendance Consultants working closely in the 56 Local Education Authorities experiencing difficulties with unauthorised absence, including in rural areas and providing funding for electronic registration in high truancy schools. The Government recently commissioned research into the causes and effects of truancy (Absence from School, Scottish Council for Research in Education, 2003) which looked at the issue of school non-attendance in both urban and rural areas. The Government will consider the findings of this research as policy is reviewed in this area.

Recommendation 23: We welcome the work of the Countryside Agency in supporting Lincolnshire's Rural Academy. This is the type of project where we would expect an Executive Agency of a department for rural affairs to be playing a key role. Unfortunately, it is a rare example. We recommend that Defra support the creation of rural academies in other rural areas. (Paragraph 54)

Web-based rural academies can be an effective way for rural communities to overcome the effects of isolation as these can benefit the whole community, not just schools. Defra fully supports the principle of creating other rural academies, as this would be a good for schools and communities in those areas. It is currently working with the Countryside Agency to see if this form of collaboration can be mainstreamed.

Recommendation 24: We recommend that the DfES' Rural Schools Group publish an annual report which sets out the issues it considered and the action taken as a result of its work. (Paragraph 56)

The Department for Education and Skills accepts this recommendation and will publish a Rural Schools Group annual report on their website.

Role of Defra

Recommendation 25: If Defra has a role in contributing towards the Government's vision of vibrant rural communities, we believe it has to maintain some presence in those areas or at least have mechanisms in place for monitoring what is happening there. (Paragraph 57)

Defra is represented in each of the Government Offices for the Regions, apart from London, and the Department for Education and Skills is also represented in all of them. A key responsibility of the Government Office network is to ensure that rural considerations are reflected in policy development and delivery at regional and local levels, and to join up the different arms of Government at a regional level. The objective is to embed rural proofing in the way Government Offices work so that all key activities are systematically assessed for their rural impacts, as well as promoting rural proofing by other regional and local bodies. In practice, there is close working between rural and education teams in the Government Offices, and with local Learning and Skills Councils and Local Education Authorities, to ensure that rural needs are considered and addressed. There is also a regular flow of information between the Government Offices and Defra/Department for Education and Skills on the issues faced and potential solutions. The Countryside Agency's recent report, Rural Proofing in 2002/03 commended the Government Offices for the progress made in implementing rural proofing at regional level.

Each Region outside London has a Regional Rural Affairs Forum which works closely with stakeholders in the region and has a key role in influencing and monitoring policy delivery in rural areas. Each regional Forum is represented on the Rural Affairs Forum for England which is coordinated by Defra and is chaired by the Minister of State for Rural Affairs. It enables Ministers to 'have regular and direct contact with the main rural groups so that they know what is going on and what countryside people think' (Rural White Paper, November 2000).

An example of the involvement of Defra's regional involvement with the education agenda can be seen in the South West. The rural team works closely with the teams leading on children and young people and skills and learning in the region to raise the profile of rural issues and ensure that policies, programmes and initiatives reflect the needs of the rural youth. This is both as part of the general rural proofing role, but also to help deliver Defra's rural PSA target around increasing productivity and improving access to services (including access to post 16 education and training).

The South West Rural Affairs Forum has a major rural proofing role in the region. It has had an initial discussion on young people (around the social exclusion agenda) with a future one planned towards the end of the year to tease out the issues and identify some positive actions. At a recent meeting the Forum discussed transport issues and agreed that better integration between the various transport schemes, including school transport provision, was a key priority. With education and transport colleagues the

rural team in the Government Office will be looking to see what can be done to make better use of school buses for community transport purposes.

The rural team has recently established a Cross-Office Group to take forward work on the rural PSA target in the South West. It includes representatives from across the office including those involved in education/skills/children and young people. A mapping exercise of current activities has been completed and work to deliver post-16 education and training in rural areas will form part of the action plan currently being developed. In addition, another Cross-Office Group to look at children's issues (following on from the publication of the Children at Risk White Paper) has been established and the rural team are represented on this.

The rural team works closely with the learning and children's teams on the 14-19 agenda, including attending conferences (targeted at Local Education Authorities, Learning and Skills Councils, Connexions etc.) and helping to facilitate workshops on rural 14-19 education. Government Office South West plays a key role in brokering collaboration between Local Education Authorities and Learning and Skills Councils. It is pushing for a rural area (Forest of Dean, which is a poorly performing indicator district) to be chosen under round two of the Department for Education and Skills 14-19 pathfinder programme. The rural team is also involved in work in North Cornwall, North Devon and West Somerset, with University of Plymouth and North Cornwall College, to identify what can be done collectively to improve delivery of services in these areas and so boost attainment and participation in education and training. The Assistant Director from Devon Local Education Authority has been seconded into Government Office South West to take this work forward.

Recommendation 26: We have highlighted three areas in this report where we believe a department for rural affairs should be playing a key role: transport; schools and colleges as community resources; and broadband and ICT. These are all policy areas which cross Government Departments and would benefit from a single entity taking a lead on behalf of rural areas. We found little evidence of Defra playing a significant role on any of these issues. (Paragraph 58)

As indicated at the start of our response, this view arises from a misunderstanding of Defra's role. In fact, Defra is playing a key role in all three of these areas. It is working closely with the Department for Transport and The Department for Education and Skills to ensure that home to school and college transport is provided effectively in rural areas and home to school transport is part of its PSA on improving public and community transport in rural areas. Defra also plays a key role in funding rural transport through the Countryside Agency's Rural Transport Partnership and Parish Transport Grants.

Defra is represented on the Extended Schools Steering Group, at the Department for Education and Skills, so that the barriers to the implementation of this programme in rural areas are identified, and policy solutions created.

Broadband and information and communications technology have been on the agenda at all the Rural Education Taskforce, and Ministerial meetings between Charles Clarke, Alun Michael and Ewen Cameron.

In addition, Defra has a secondee at the Department for Trade and Industry, working on the cross government broadband agenda.

As explained in response to Recommendation 25, the Government Offices will have an important role to play in ensuring a joined up approach at regional level.

Whilst Defra is closely involved with all this work, a key principle of rural proofing is that the Government Departments themselves do it and delivery their policies in rural areas with their own resources. Defra exists to champion the rural message and to encourage and help, with the Countryside Agency, Departments to get delivery in rural areas right. As the joint evidence by Ministers to the Select Committee showed, ours is a partnership approach and we believe that Government Departments can achieve more together than they achieve alone.

Recommendation 27: We recommend that a section of Defra's website be devoted to work within its rural affairs remit. It should contain details of the way Defra has represented the interests of rural areas on particular issues to other policy makers within government. It should also include reports on how effectively Government policies have been delivered in rural areas. This would go some way towards improving Defra's accountability in relation to its rural affairs remit. It would also provide an excellent example of open government. (Paragraph 59)

Defra already has a section of its website that concentrates on what it is doing to enhance the quality of life in rural areas - <http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/default.htm>. This is undergoing further development at the moment and we accept that we need to do more to explain what we are doing and to provide examples of success and good practice in rural areas.

In terms of assessing the delivery of Government policies in rural areas, the Countryside Agency's role of producing its annual report on rural proofing policy, sourced from Departments themselves, ensures an independent audit and publication of this information. The report is available through their website - <http://www.countryside.gov.uk/ruralproofing/default.htm>.

Recommendation 28: Most of our recommendations to Defra in this Report relate to monitoring and reporting on the effect of education policy in rural areas. We are surprised and disappointed that Defra is not carrying out this work already. It is the

least that a department for rural affairs should be doing if it is genuinely to represent the interests of rural areas. We believe this work should only be the start. Defra and its agencies could contribute to innovative solutions to the problems and issues facing rural areas which its monitoring work has highlighted. Only then will it truly be fulfilling its mandate - as reflected in its title - to be a department for rural affairs. (Paragraph 60)

Defra's role is not to deliver education in rural areas and we believe that it would not only be wrong but would be damaging to rural areas for Defra to seek such a role. There is no way that an already stretched Department would be able to afford the resources and expertise, in a field that is outside its experience and expertise, when that experience and expertise already exists in DfES. Rather, Defra's role is to work with the Department for Education and Skills and its agencies to ensure that the rural aspect of policy formulation, delivery and evaluation is fully understood and acted upon to that end.

Defra's education strand of the rural services Public Services Agreement delivery and programme plan, focusing on post 16 education and training, includes a number of monitoring projects to ensure equitable delivery in rural areas. The Rural Education Taskforce is currently working to identify the key education data for monitoring and analysis, so that priorities for joint action between Defra, the Department for Education and Skills, the Learning and Skills Council and the Countryside Agency can be targeted. This will allow the Taskforce to inform policy makers of areas of concern, and also to identify solutions to those problems.

Defra is also working with the Countryside Agency to identify, highlight and promulgate best practice in service delivery in rural areas across all services - not just that of education.

We understand and accept the Select Committee's stress on meeting the needs of rural areas and respectfully submit that the partnership approach is the right one – ensuring that the capacity and expertise of DfES and its agencies is applied to meeting rural needs and that the capacity and expertise of Defra is available to DfES and its agencies to help DfES's rural delivery.

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
8 August 2003