Ex-post evaluation of the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC)

Report to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)

December 2014
Executive Summary

Context and purpose

1. Against a backdrop of the Rural White Paper (2000), the Foot and Mouth Disease crisis (2001) and Lord Haskins’ report on Modernising Rural Delivery (2003), the case for the formation of a “new Countryside Agency” was made in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs’ (Defra) Rural Strategy (2004). The legal basis for the new organisation was set out in the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. This described three main functions for what became the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), namely those of advocate, adviser and watchdog.

2. The CRC became an independent organisation on 1st October 2006. On 29th June 2010, the decision to abolish it was announced. CRC formally ceased to exist on 31st March 2013. The overall life of the CRC (as an independent organisation) was therefore about 6.5 years. Over this period, it spent some £37.4m executing its three key functions.

3. In late 2013, Defra commissioned SQW to complete an ex post evaluation of the statutory functions carried out by the CRC. Its purpose was to codify and capture the lessons and insights that might be gleaned from CRC’s activities. The evaluation itself was small scale and largely qualitative, relying mainly on different forms of consultation and case studies.

Reflecting on CRC’s activities

4. The evaluation found that the activities undertaken by CRC in support of its three main functions evolved constantly. The functions of advocate, adviser and watchdog were underpinned by: a number of “set piece” products (e.g. State of the Countryside reports and Rural Proofing reports); wider outputs linked to Inquiries (e.g. housing, uplands), thematic studies (e.g. rural disadvantage) and best practice guides (e.g. tackling financial exclusion); and more general processes of engagement and influence.

5. Stakeholders’ reflections on activities linked to the three functions included the following:

- Both commissioners and staff were involved in executing the advocacy function on a day to day basis, and the role of the Rural Advocate – who was also the chair of CRC – was extremely important. However accountabilities were complicated – with the Rural Advocate reporting direct to the Prime Minister and the CRC reporting to Defra. Some stakeholders considered that this led to synergies and impact; others talked more in terms of confusion. Nevertheless the role of the Rural Advocate in bridging the gap between rural communities and government ministers was widely acknowledged even if there was not always total alignment between the Rural Advocate’s work and that of the CRC (as set out in its Business Plans).

- In relation to the adviser function, the quality of evidence and analysis produced by CRC was widely applauded, as was its accessibility: “State of the Countryside” reports, in particular, were widely used and seen as exemplary while the various Inquiries and thematic studies were judged to be independent, well-reported and balanced. Some commented that CRC perhaps tried to cover too much ground and
that greater stakeholder engagement in the choice of research topics and the
delivery of research might have been helpful. But in the round, this function was
considered to have been executed well

- Less effective – on balance – was the watchdog function, and some described CRC as
a “watchdog without teeth”. Whilst it succeeded in keeping rural proofing on the
agenda, CRC’s limited powers, together with the implications of a reporting line to
Defra (rather than, say, the Cabinet Office), meant that most considered it to have
had little real effect.

6. The overall conclusion was therefore that CRC’s effectiveness had probably been greater
with regard to its advocate and adviser roles than in relation to its watchdog function. More
fundamentally, some considered that the watchdog role actually sat very uneasily with the
other two functions.

Understanding the process of influence

7. CRC’s activities were prompted by different influences (sometimes involving Defra,
sometimes Other Government Departments, sometimes the Prime Minister and sometimes
the Rural Advocate). On occasion, major pieces of work were launched “in responsive mode”
with the agendas essentially set by others (e.g. with regard to its work on broadband) or by
the prospect of rural crises (e.g. work on the rural economy in the context of a possible FMD
outbreak in 2007). At other times, CRC very largely took the initiative and forced the
agenda; the Uplands Inquiry was frequently cited in this context.

8. In combination, the prompt for action and the link into government had some bearing on the
process of influence. For example, effectively commissioned by the Prime Minister, the rural
economies workstream was seen by some as “too close to the centre” to be “independent”.
Conversely, the Uplands Inquiry was wholly independent – but policy makers then had no
real compulsion to act. Work in the domain of broadband and housing was somewhere
between these two extremes and was reviewed as “generally helpful” (as changes were
already afoot through the wider machinery of government), although few stakeholders went
further in their assessment.

Outcomes, impacts and additionality

9. A review of successive Corporate Plans and Business Plans suggested that through its three
statutory functions CRC sought to achieve three main outcomes:

- to ensure that the voice of rural communities was heard in mainstream decision-
  making

- to raise awareness of – and commitment to – rural issues amongst stakeholders

- to influence mainstream decision-making, policy, delivery, targets and funding to
  ensure that the “rural dimension” was embedded in decision-making at appropriate
  levels.

10. Although relying on a highly fragmented evidence base (which undoubtedly has decayed
over time), the evaluation found that CRC made progress in relation to all three, and
particularly the first two outcomes. Specific examples included better housing targets in rural areas; the development of community-level broadband solutions; and the evolving approach to payments for ecosystems services.

However there were sharply differing views on the additionality of CRC’s role. Those closest to CRC argued that key outcomes would have happened later or not at all without CRC, and that the key aspects of CRC’s work that had made the difference were (a) the robust and trusted evidence base, which was grounded in “real world” experience and tackled cross-cutting issues, and (b) the Advocate providing a consistent and coherent rural voice. Conversely, external observers were more cautious in their judgements. For them, CRC’s work was relevant and there was some awareness of it, but concluding that a particular policy or initiative would not have achieved its final form without the benefit of CRC’s inputs and influences was a step too far. Some were sceptical; most simply did not know.

It is not possible to comment on the extent to which these outcomes led to enduring impacts across rural communities in England; CRC was one factor among many across a hugely complex set of delivery processes. Further, many consultees considered that a judgement of this nature was inappropriate: the role of CRC was to gather evidence and to use it to influence policy but CRC’s ability to effect the consequences for rural communities was very limited.

Conclusions and lessons

Whilst “independent”, CRC was ultimately accountable to – and strongly influenced by – government. Therefore, as an organisation, there was a basic tension at its core. In the main, CRC navigated this effectively, certainly in relation to the first two outcomes listed above. The watchdog function was much more challenging and here, “independence” was double-edged, limiting its traction with both Defra and OGDs. Ultimately, CRC had no real clout akin, say, to Ofsted inspectors visiting schools, or the National Audit Office reviewing public expenditure; all it could do was to generate and use evidence relating to rural communities to “inform” and subsequently “influence”.

Whether its achievements were worth £37m of tax-payers’ money is – clearly – a judgement call. CRC did raise awareness of rural issues, and it took steps to ensure that the voice of rural communities was heard, but – particularly in an era of austerity – some would question whether a role of this nature should be funded entirely through the public purse. To a significant extent, these functions ought to be being fulfilled through voluntary/charity sector bodies, both individually and collectively; and in this context, the role of groupings like the Rural Coalition – which was actually initiated by CRC in 2008 – should be important.

Where voluntary arrangements of this type may struggle is in relation to the watchdog function. Yet CRC also made limited headway in this domain. Particularly in relation to central government, there was (and is) a need to influence both ministers and civil servants to “make things happen”. Even within individual departments, these two constituencies were very different. In summary terms, one appeared willing to act on the basis of headlines and quick wins, while the second sought incontrovertible evidence of value for money; from the vantage point of England’s rural communities, neither of these appetites was easily satisfied. Based on the evidence considered in the course of this ex-post evaluation, ten overarching lessons are summarised in the table below.
Table 1: Overall lessons arising from the work of the Commission for Rural Communities

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<th>Lesson</th>
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<td>1: “Independence” from government is important – but it is also double edged</td>
<td>“Independence” is – arguably – crucial in relation to evidence, for it confers a level of credibility and robustness that makes it very powerful, and far more likely to be used. However “independent” organisations will struggle as “watchdogs” within government, particularly if they are also ultimately accountable to government.</td>
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<td>2: The roles of adviser and advocate/watchdog may not always be compatible</td>
<td>The impartiality of evidence and expertise may be called into question if it is also used as the basis for advocacy. There needs to be some level of separation between these functions to mitigate the risk of “evidence statements” being seen as lobbying documents with limited currency.</td>
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<td>3: Much credibility can be gained through one, consistently high quality, flagship publication</td>
<td>Although not “invented” by CRC, “State of the Countryside” was – arguably – its most important “product”. It was widely used and it conferred on the organisation a high level of credibility and legitimacy as a real authority in relation to the nature of the rural condition.</td>
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<td>4: Exercising real influence with government ministers depends crucially on networks/relationships and the ability to respond quickly</td>
<td>There are several examples – usually through the work of the Rural Advocate and/or other Commissioners – of CRC engaging effectively with ministers, including with the Prime Minister. This engagement was premised on relationships, however, and it most cases it also demanded very quick responses. At times, this imperative placed real pressures on CRC.</td>
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<td>5: There is a balance to be struck between “responsiveness” and seeking to set the agenda in relation to rural issues</td>
<td>CRC was – at times – accused of being too reactive and insufficiently strategic (i.e. deciding what its priorities should be and seeing them through). There is an important balance to be struck in this context – and its complex relationship with government was again a factor. However in some respects, it appeared to achieve most at those points when it took the initiative and essentially set the agenda. The Uplands Inquiry is an important example.</td>
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<td>6: The language of economics is very important in seeking to influence senior civil servants within the policy-making process</td>
<td>At times, CRC struggled to engage with senior civil servants and one of the explanations was its limited capacity in relation to “hard” economics – particularly robust value for money assessments. Equally, it needed expertise in policy development. Particularly in the early years, CRC may have lacked the appropriate balance.</td>
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<td>7: The relationship between the role of Rural Advocate and the role of CRC Chair needed greater clarity</td>
<td>The Rural Advocate and the Chair of CRC were the same person, but the two roles had different reporting lines – the first to the Prime Minister and the second to Defra. This led to some tensions. While these might, at times, have been creative ones, they were a complication.</td>
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<td>8: It may not be appropriate for an organisation charged with rural proofing across government to report to Defra</td>
<td>There was a case for CRC sitting completely outside of Defra, particularly given its imperative to work across all government departments in relation to its most challenging function, that of rural watchdog. Had it been vested in the Cabinet Office, the cross-cutting role might have been easier to implement. However it would be perverse for an organisation charged with generating impartial rural evidence to be separated completely from government’s rural department. This suggests, again, that the three statutory functions might have been delivered more effectively had they been split up.</td>
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<td>9: Effective rural evidence and advocacy is not wholly premised on an organisation’s own capacity in relation to rural delivery – although it is important that some staff have rural delivery experience</td>
<td>When CRC was first formed, there was real concern that it would struggle to be effective in the absence of a programme delivery function (which had characterised its predecessor, the Countryside Agency). This study has found very little evidence that this was in fact the case. CRC’s advice might have been taken more seriously if there had been the “carrot” of some kind of funding programme – and there was some evidence of this – but there was little feedback to suggest that the quality of CRC’s advice was compromised. That said, CRC benefitted from staff that had knowledge of delivery “on the ground” (many of whom had transferred across from CA). This legacy experience was an important asset for CRC.</td>
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<td>10: Particularly with the internet and social media, an elaborate sub-national staffing structure is not a pre-requisite for influence at a local level although local networks are still important</td>
<td>CRC did not have an elaborate regional office structure, unlike its predecessor, the Countryside Agency. When it was first formed, there was concern that it could not function without a significant local presence. This evaluation has found no real evidence that it lost anything – in part because it could draw on the legacy of a network of relationships through staff transferred from CA and in part because it could reach far and wide through the internet and their use of social media. There is some evidence (from our e-survey) to suggest that the impact of CRC might actually have been greater at local than national levels, despite the absence of a local staff resource.</td>
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Source: SQW – based on findings from the evaluation