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JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

LORD HASKINS’ REVIEW OF RURAL DELIVERY: POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE JNCC

Paper by Marcus Yeo and Wyn Jones

1. Background to the review

1.1 In November 2002, Lord Haskins was asked to review arrangements for delivering Defra’s rural policies in England, and to make recommendations as to how the effectiveness of delivery mechanisms could be improved.

1.2 As well as assessing the role and activities of various parts of Defra, the review also covered other organisations involved in rural delivery, including English Nature and the Countryside Agency.

1.3 The review was published on 11 November 2003. An initial response from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Margaret Beckett, was released on the same date.

2. The recommendations of the review

2.1 The review contains a wide-ranging series of recommendations, some of which are quite radical. The recommendations are grouped within five themes:

i.  to improve accountability through a clearer definition of responsibility for policy and delivery functions;

ii. to bring delivery closer to the customer by devolving greater responsibility to regional and local organisations for the delivery of economic and social policy;

iii. to develop a more integrated approach to sustainable land management by rationalising agencies with overlapping agendas into a new agency responsible for sustainable land management;

iv. to improve the co-ordination of delivery by enhancing the role of Government Offices for the Regions as co-ordinators and monitors;

v. to make things better for the customer and get greater value for money for the taxpayer through a more integrated approach to regulation and through simpler services.

1 The review is available on Defra’s website (http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/ruraldelivery/default.htm)
2.2 The full list of recommendations is contained in Annex A

2.3 The JNCC is only mentioned in passing in the review (see 2.4 below). However, some of the recommendations might have implications for the JNCC, as they relate directly to the role and responsibilities of English Nature and/or the Countryside Agency, or to Defra’s wider remit. The following are particularly pertinent:

i. clarification of Defra’s remit, so that it focuses on policy development and devolves policy delivery to national, regional and local agencies (recommendations 1-3);

ii. a more ‘joined-up’ approach to target setting within Defra, with greater involvement of delivery agencies and more shared targets with other Government departments (recommendations 5 and 7);

iii. the transfer of all of the Countryside Agency’s functions to other organisations (recommendation 9);

iv. the establishment of an integrated agency to promote sustainable land management, through the merger of English Nature, Defra’s Rural Development Service, the landscape and access/recreation functions of the Countryside Agency, and possibly the delivery functions of the Forestry Commission in England (recommendations 16-19).

2.4 The review proposes that English Nature’s role in delivering the ‘special functions’ through the JNCC should be taken over by the new integrated agency.

2.5 Most of the remaining recommendations are concerned with improving regional or local delivery of rural services and are of little or no relevance to the JNCC.

3. Defra’s response to the review

3.1 Defra’s preliminary response to Lord Haskins’ review is attached as Annex B.

3.2 Government accepts the recommendation to establish a new integrated agency dealing with biodiversity, natural resource protection and landscape issues. However, the proposal to abolish the Countryside Agency is rejected, although it is acknowledged that its role should be reduced.

3.3 Primary legislation would be needed to fully implement these changes. However, it may be possible to make shorter term arrangements that move some way towards this goal. The timing of legislation is uncertain but will be after the next general election.
4. Issues of potential relevance to the JNCC

Landscape and access issues

4.1 As noted in 2.4 above, the review recommends that the new integrated agency should assume English Nature’s responsibility for delivering the ’special functions’ through the JNCC.

4.2 It is proposed that the new agency would take on the Countryside Agency’s responsibilities for protecting landscape and increasing opportunities for access and recreation. This would bring the English agency into line with Scottish Natural Heritage and the Countryside Council for Wales. It would therefore be appropriate to consider whether there is a GB or international dimension to these functions that should sit with the JNCC. It is unlikely that such an additional role would be required for access, but it may be desirable for landscape protection.

4.3 Any such change to the JNCC’s functions would require primary legislation.

Forestry issues

4.4 The review proposes that the policy development role of the Forestry Commission in England should be transferred to Defra, and its delivery functions should be integrated, or at least closely aligned, with the work of the new agency.

4.5 If these changes were to be implemented, there would still be a need for GB/UK-wide advice on forestry issues. As some of these issues are closely linked to biodiversity conservation, it would be desirable to ensure close co-ordination with the work of the JNCC.

Composition of the Joint Committee

4.6 The recommendations contained in the review would entail radical changes to English Nature, the Countryside Agency, and possibly the Forestry Commission. In light of this, reassessment of the composition of the Joint Committee might be required.

Implementation of the FMPR recommendations

4.7 Full implementation of Lord Haskins’ proposals would require primary legislation. This may provide an opportunity to implement the outstanding changes arising from the JNCC’s FMPR, including the addition of a fourth independent member to the Joint Committee, rationalisation of the role of Northern Ireland bodies on the Committee, and redefinition of the special functions to reflect the JNCC’s UK-wide role.
**Separation of policy and delivery in the rural environment**

4.8 The separation of policy development and policy delivery is one of the precepts underpinning the review, e.g. leading to the recommendation that responsibility for agri-environment schemes in England would be transferred from the Rural Development Service to the new integrated agency. However, Defra has confirmed that the new agency should retain a role in providing ‘independent policy advice’, as well as implementing policy.

4.9 It is possible that the principle of separating policy and delivering may be extended across the full range of Defra’s functions. For example, there is an ongoing internal review of Defra’s wildlife protection and control arrangements, including CITES licensing. This may have implications for the JNCC.

**Opportunities to influence target setting in Government**

4.10 The review recommends that Government should adopt a more joined-up approach to setting rural targets in England, e.g. in relation to Defra’s Public Service Agreement. Implementation of this principle across Government may offer opportunities to introduce appropriate targets for international biodiversity conservation as part of the 2004 Spending Review.

5. **Next steps**

5.1 The next phase in progressing the better integration of the relevant work areas of English Nature, the Countryside Agency and the Rural Development Service, especially local delivery, is unlikely to affect the JNCC. However, the JNCC needs to be aware of developments and plans to ensure that the special functions are not overlooked or compromised.

5.2 Support Unit staff will retain a watching brief and will keep the Joint Committee informed of progress.
Annex A. Main recommendations from Lord Haskins’ review of rural delivery

Improve accountability through a clearer separation of responsibility for policy and delivery functions

1. Defra should review and clarify its rural policy remit in order to ensure that it is consistently understood by all concerned, including those who deliver its policies.

2. Defra’s prime responsibility should be the development of policy, and it should arrange for the delivery of its policies through national, regional and local agencies. Policy and delivery functions should be managed separately so that accountability for policy and delivery is clearly defined.

3. The separation of policy and delivery functions should oblige Defra to consult delivery organisations at the earliest stages in policy formulation and to ask the latter to put forward proposals for the effective delivery of policy. In this way delivery organisations will be more accountable for effective management of programmes, and there should be less duplication of existing regional and local schemes. Defra will continue to appoint members of the various boards and to hold them accountable for their performance.

4. Defra policy officials should develop a good understanding of delivery issues through a programme of training and secondments to delivery organisations. An understanding of delivery issues must be given higher priority in the assessment of individual performance. Secondments and recruitment from delivery organisations should also be encouraged in order to improve mutual understanding.

5. Deliverers should agree targets with Defra, working with the Treasury, rather than having unrealistic ones imposed on them by Whitehall. This would include Defra’s rural Public Service Agreement. In this way delivery organisations will accept greater ownership of these targets, which will be more achievable and less vulnerable to manipulation. There should be greater emphasis on setting rural targets that are linked to real outcomes rather than outputs (such as the number of grants processed).

6. Delivery organisations should have the maximum flexibility to allocate resources in the most effective ways, whilst keeping the necessary discipline over administrative costs.

7. Defra should agree shared targets with other government departments and their delivery organisations in order to secure better delivery of its rural policy objectives. This will substantially strengthen Defra’s ability to influence outcomes.

8. Defra should improve the quality of its management information in order to take better informed decisions and to control the administrative costs associated with the schemes and services that it funds.

9. In pursuit of the objectives of separating policy from delivery and of devolving delivery, the functions of the Countryside Agency should be transferred to the appropriate specialist organisations. Thus:
i. policy development (including the commissioning of pilots and demonstration projects), together with the promotion of rural proofing, would pass to Defra and the Government Offices for the Regions;

ii. social and economic programmes would pass to regional and local networks of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), local authorities and the voluntary and community sector;

iii. environmental, landscape, access and recreational programmes would pass to the new, integrated agency proposed below (see Recommendation 16);

iv. review of rural proofing, challenge and external advice would pass to a reformed Rural Affairs Forum for England.

In the light of these changes the Countryside Agency would cease to be required as a separate organisation.

Bring delivery closer to the customer by devolving greater power to regional and local organisations to deliver economic and social policy

10. Regional Development Agencies should play a key role in the devolution of Defra’s rural economic and social agenda. They must therefore demonstrate, and where necessary develop, their capacity to contribute to sustainable development in addressing rural needs.

11. A concordat with Defra must be established as a first step towards making the Regional Development Agencies accountable for their part in achieving Defra’s policy objectives on rural sustainable development.

12. The successors to the existing business and farm diversification schemes (the so-called ‘Project-Based Schemes’) that are administered by Defra’s Rural Development Service under the England Rural Development Programme should become the responsibility of Regional Development Agencies, which will arrange for their delivery.

13. Regional Development Agencies should have the lead responsibility in co-ordinating public sector rural business support and advice. To that end they should take direct responsibility for Business Links. They should also take steps to improve the quality and consistency of business support and advisory services.

14. Local authorities and local partnerships should assume the main responsibility for delivery of schemes and services to rural communities. They should be fully consulted by Defra and the Regional Development Agencies about any changes to policy and delivery arrangements and should be given the necessary flexibility to address local needs. The potential of Rural Community Councils as partners in community based delivery is underestimated and should be enhanced.

15. As part of the next round of local public service agreements Defra, working with other government departments and the Local Government Association should agree joint Whitehall targets for the delivery of rural policies by local authorities.
Develop a more integrated approach to sustainable land management by rationalising agencies with overlapping agendas

16. The government should establish an integrated agency to promote sustainable use of land and the natural environment. This is necessary in order to prepare for the expanding land management agenda and to improve co-ordination and service delivery to customers. This would be achieved through a merger of English Nature, Defra’s Rural Development Service and some functions of the Countryside Agency. Its remit should embrace biodiversity, historical landscape, natural landscape, natural resources, access and recreation.

17. Defra should establish close collaboration between the Environment Agency and the new, integrated agency so that their activities complement each other.

18. Consistent with the principle of clear separation of policy from delivery functions, the policy development role of the Forestry Commission in England should be transferred to Defra.

19. Following the creation of the new integrated agency, it is logical to integrate or closely align the delivery functions (regulation, incentives, advice) of the Forestry Commission in England with those of the new agency.

20. Defra should seek opportunities to rationalise the various levy-funded organisations that it sponsors in respect of certain agricultural sectors for marketing, developmental and other purposes. There is scope to share resources (administrative, economic and research) between the various boards and to strengthen support for industry programmes if savings are realised through rationalisation.

Improve the co-ordination of delivery by enhancing the role of Government Offices for the Regions as co-ordinators and monitors

21. The Government Offices for the Regions should be given a stronger remit to promote co-ordination of and monitor rural delivery and to promote rural proofing on behalf of Defra. Regional Rural Priority Boards, chaired by Government Offices for the Regions and including key regional and local bodies responsible for rural regeneration and service delivery, should be set up to provide strategic co-ordination and monitoring.

22. Delivery agencies should strengthen joint working through the development of joint regional delivery plans. These would include designated lead delivery partners, agreed joint targets, shared resources and clear accountability for delivery.

23. Defra must consult earlier and more closely with the Government Offices for the Regions to ensure more coordinated policy development and strategic planning at the national level and reduce the number of strategies that are handed down to the regions.

24. The Government Offices for the Regions should focus on their role as co-ordinators and monitors of programmes affecting rural areas and not be involved in direct delivery. They should disengage from their current role in the administration of EU
Structural Funds if and when these are replaced by a national programme of regional regeneration, as the government has proposed.

25. Regional Rural Affairs Forums (RRAFs), comprising representatives of rural customers and beneficiaries, should become the forums in which national and regional delivery of rural policies is reviewed and reported on. Their key duties would be:

i. to highlight important issues and priorities for rural development and service delivery;

ii. to comment on the effectiveness of rural development and service delivery in their region and identify areas for improvement;

iii. to comment on the impact and effectiveness of existing policy developments and generate new ideas;

iv. to provide leadership to help drive rural development at regional and local level.

The RRAFs would receive secretariat services from the proposed Rural Priorities Board secretariat (see Recommendation 21).

Make things better for the customer and get greater value for money for the taxpayer through a more integrated approach to regulation and through simpler services

26. The Government Offices for the Regions should work with regional and local organisations to develop a more co-ordinated approach to front line delivery. This should include spreading best practice between regions on integrated delivery and facilitation, recognising what is practical and affordable.

27. Defra, as the lead body, should accelerate the development of a ‘whole farm’ approach that will ensure better co-ordination of government regulation and compliance, subsidy, advice and financial incentives linked to farm businesses. This would require:

i. the development of an integrated rural database linked to land-based business (to which the Environment Agency would have access), subject to resolution of data privacy constraints;

ii. risk-based self-assessment backed up by audit, preferably using such independent bodies as FWAG and LEAF;

iii. encouraging more rapid uptake of internet use by farmers and rural businesses in general;

iv. the creation of a farm advisory service in the light of the recent settlement on CAP reform; this would logically fall under the control of the new, integrated agency (see Recommendation 16).

28. In view of the expanding environmental protection agenda, the Environment Agency should agree with local authorities a supplementary role on regulation and compliance.
Local authorities should agree standards for delivery with the Agency and call in its support where the extent of a problem or the risks connected with it are beyond the authorities’ capacity to manage.

29. Local authorities should take the lead local role in co-ordinating general regulation and compliance advice on farm premises.

30. Defra should rationalise its inspection functions, integrating them wherever possible with existing regulatory authorities to achieve administrative savings and avoid duplication of skills.

31. Defra should review all rural funding streams and schemes, to achieve a more rational, transparent and comprehensible approach to the administration of financial incentives and to ensure that all new initiatives are consistent with Defra’s delivery strategy, add real value and do not duplicate.

32. Defra should review and simplify the current procedural rules connected with grants to rural businesses and communities in order to provide greater discretion in the execution and targeting of grants in a user-friendly way, consistent with state aid rules.

Report on progress

33. Defra should publish progress reports on the implementation of my recommendations in the spring or summer of 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007.
Annex B. Margaret Beckett’s response to Lord Haskin’s review

I am very pleased to welcome today the publication of Lord Haskins’ report on Rural Delivery, copies of which are in the Libraries of both Houses. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Lord Haskins and his team for all their work. The report is compelling in its analysis of the rural delivery landscape as confusing for customers and too bureaucratic and centralised to meet our future challenges. This echoes the concerns which led us to commission his report. While we have already begun to address these concerns this report helps us take our work forward.

Shortly we will also be publishing a review – 3 years on – of the Rural White Paper alongside a study of economic performance in rural areas from Birkbeck College. In the New Year, drawing on the 3 reports, we expect to publish a ‘refreshed’ rural strategy.

I attach a copy of Lord Haskins’ recommendations, but will single out for comment a few key issues.

Next steps

My first priority is an immediate full review of rural funding schemes to provide a clearer and simpler framework for applicants and to achieve a reduction in bureaucratic procedures.

In the principles he published in the summer Lord Haskins called for a clearer division of responsibility between policy making and delivery. Government’s clear role is to set the framework for policy. But is clear that policy advice can be particularly valuable when it comes from those involved in delivery. I attach huge importance to independent advice from my Department’s agencies and partners. I do not intend to lose that advice.

An Integrated Agency

A major challenge in the 21st century is the effective stewardship of land in England against the need to conserve and improve the natural environment, maintaining and enhancing biodiversity. Lord Haskins recommends bringing together elements of the work done by English Nature, the Countryside Agency and the Rural Development Service where those functions will most enable the agency to reflect its new remit. I accept that broad recommendation. We will also consider how to achieve alignment of the Forestry Commission with the integrated agency.

The integrated agency will build on the successes and expertise of its constituent parts, such as English Nature’s worldwide reputation on biodiversity matters. It will create a single, stronger authoritative body, accelerating integration of work on biodiversity, natural resource protection and landscape issues in order to improve the environment across rural, urban, marine and coastal England. It will provide independent policy advice and implement policy within the framework of the Government’s approach to sustainable development. I will look for a legislative opportunity as soon as possible to formalise arrangements for the agency, and am pleased the constituent bodies have agreed to work with Defra to make practical progress before that point. This will allow continuity for the organisations, their staff and stakeholders, while preparing for the future.
**Countryside Agency**

Lord Haskins recommended the abolition of the Countryside Agency. I do not, however, agree that there will be no role for it. There will be a continued need for a much smaller organisation, with a new, well focused role providing independent policy advice to Government from a national perspective on issues affecting people in rural communities, and analysing and reporting on best practice in the delivery of the Government’s rural policies. We also need to build on experience so far on rural proofing and embedding rural objectives in all relevant aspects of government policy.

**Regional and local delivery**

Lord Haskins recommends devolution of the way in which the Defra family delivers its policies to achieve greater effectiveness and accountability at regional and local level. My Department will therefore be discussing with the Regional Development Agencies, the Government Offices for the Regions, local government, the Rural Affairs Forum and the voluntary sector how to define new mechanisms for delivering services to rural communities, which will be accompanied by strong and effective performance management arrangements.

Much work will be required to develop these proposals into a practical implementation plan, which we hope to publish in the Spring. I want to work in partnership on this with all those concerned to secure real improvements in sustainable development from biodiversity to resource protection. This is not only in the interests of Britain’s rural communities, but in the interests of us all.