

## **An assignment to support the government's 'rural proofing' policies**

### **Introduction and background**



The Countryside Agency was a statutory body formed by the merger of the Countryside Commission and the Rural Development Commission, with the aim of improving the rural environment and the quality of rural life. In determining national strategies, policies and plans, rural areas were highlighted as having special needs, identified in government White Papers as 'rural proofing' matters. The Countryside Agency therefore became committed to rural proofing and produced a checklist of factors to be considered for rural proofing purposes.

As part of the rural proofing process, Touchstone Renard was commissioned by the Countryside Agency to carry out a study of the role of the regulators and other external bodies in England that were associated with the rural environment to incorporate their activities within the rural proofing process.

### **Our task**

Many of the services used by rural communities were delivered by private organisations, subject to regulators, appointed by the government but independent of general departmental control. The Countryside Agency requested Touchstone Renard to carry out a review of relevant regulatory bodies, having regard to twenty key issues that impacted on rural communities.

For the purposes of the study, we were also asked to approach a range of other organisations, including consumer groups, to allow a balanced picture to emerge. The primary aims of the review included:

- Identifying where policies and activities were having a differential impact in rural areas
- Identifying any policy mechanisms in place to reflect rural needs and circumstances
- Identifying where regulators had already adjusted their activities to align with rural areas
- Where there was a differential impact and no adjustments had been made for rural areas, to ascertain the implications
- Making recommendations to adjust policies or activities to improve their impact on rural life
- Highlighting policy development that presented good or poor rural proofing opportunity

### **How we went about it**

We selected a small team from our experienced consultants, with the right interpersonal skills, to carry out the assignment which was also overseen personally by Phil Austin, Managing Director of Touchstone Renard.

The approach taken was one of combined desk research and on-site interviews with regulatory and other organisations. Our team worked with Countryside Agency managers in the first instance to refine the list of bodies to be included in the review.

The most significant challenge was that of gaining acceptance by regulators and other organisations that rural proofing was necessary at all. The view expressed was that regulators needed to be 'even handed' with all stakeholders and that rural proofing could provoke an element of 'special treatment'.

Regulators were (and are) legally obliged to have regard to the circumstances of all vulnerable consumer groups and were inclined to believe that rural proofing was best applied by the government during the legislative process. However, we worked to engage the enthusiasm of regulators, with their considerable experience across a wide range of service supply chains.

Notwithstanding the views of regulators, our team did achieve a valuable contribution by those interviewed, in terms of exploring the question of rural proofing generally and offering advice and guidance, from which clear opportunities for the Countryside Agency emerged.

### **What we achieved**

As a result of our team's work, we delivered a presentation to Countryside Agency Managers, highlighting our findings and making a series of recommendations, set out in a comprehensive report.

A key recommendation identified the opportunity for the Countryside Agency to act as the 'champion' for rural causes, by progressing a range of actions, in cooperation with the government, the regulators, relevant service providers and consumer bodies.

We also proposed internal action that the Countryside Agency could take to offer solutions to rural communities and promote rural service provision and other benefits. Part of the Countryside Agency subsequently merged into Natural England, while the other part is now known as the Commission for Rural Communities and continues to take responsibility for rural proofing issues.