

A Report on the Rural Commission and Annual Rural Conference held on 7th and 8th September 2010 in Chester

The Ministerial address, given by video link, was given by Richard Benyon M.P., Minister for Natural Environment and Fisheries. He spoke of the Government's determination to 'do things in a new way' observing that on many rural issues Local Government was 'ahead of the game' broadband being a case in point. He recognised the need for greater freedoms and flexibilities from central control to encourage innovation in service provision. The Big Society must be at the core of this process listening and working with local communities whilst requiring them to accept a degree of responsibility. He placed emphasis on the importance of local design statements and parish plans which highlighted local priorities and demonstrated lateral thinking. DEFRA, for its part, will be working across all policies and programmes, drawing up collective plans to address rural issues particularly around broadband, transport and the provision of affordable housing.

Chris Whitwell, Director of Friends, Families and Travellers then spoke. It is impossible, he said, to quantify accurately the number of gypsy / travellers who reside in the United Kingdom but it is estimated to be around 300,000 of whom two thirds are settled. As at spring 2010 some 40% are classified as Romany gypsies, 40% Irish Travellers and the remaining 20% New Age Travellers. Only half of the gypsy / traveller population live on residential sites or small private sites owned by gypsy families. They are often subject to poor health outcomes, high child mortality rates and low educational attainment with illiteracy rates as high as 62% and with many families living on unsuitable sites.

The 2004 Housing Act required Local Authorities to conduct a housing needs assessment in respect of gypsy / travellers which should be updated on a regular basis. The demise of regional plans and withdrawal of Government funding has left uncertainty over the number of pitches Local Authorities should be required to provide. In the meantime £18 million per year is spent moving them on from illegal sites.

Mr Whitwell advocates that once an Authority has established its full quota of pitches it should have the necessary powers to move on illegal travellers immediately. It should also have the powers to direct travellers to a vacant site whether or not they wish to go there.

Money is far better spent finding solutions rather than forcing gypsies / travellers from one illegal site to another.

A presentation by Cllr. Box on Rural Transport illustrated many of the known problems whilst highlighting potential solutions. He asserted that issues around transport provision and infrastructure were best determined by Local Authorities who should be given greater freedom to unlock funding sources to undertake schemes aimed at reducing congestion and improving air quality. He was also keen to see a greater investment in buses with better, more intelligent, integration of services.

There was a lively presentation on the role played by rural pubs with plenty of interesting facts and figures. There are about 52,000 pubs nationwide of which only 12% are in town centres. The current rate of closures is about 39 pubs each week. The smoking ban, the rise in utility bills, a fall in alcohol consumption (14% since 2004) and the general economic climate have all had an adverse effect. The industry employs half a million staff with a further three hundred and eighty thousand engaged in associated trades. Each one generates about £80,000 for the local economy through part time jobs, supplies and services. They also play a vital role in the social life of a community and should be seen as an asset in Parish Plans.

There was also a request that pubs should be considered for business rate relief and a plea for Licensing Authorities to recognise their importance. If / when problems arose, then a solution rather than heavy handed restrictions should be sought. Any move by Authorities to introduce minimum pricing would be seen as a blunt tool which was unlikely to solve drink related health problems or to improve law and order. The number of pub closures could then escalate to the detriment of the community.

Alison Cook