

Rural Strategy 2004 Fact Sheet:

New Countryside Agency

What is the New Countryside Agency?

- The New Countryside Agency will be a new and distinctive body, created as a strong voice for rural people and communities, especially those suffering disadvantage, to suggest innovative solutions to their needs and monitor and report on progress in delivery. It will provide strong and impartial advice to Government. It will fulfil a need that no other organisation can do at national level, including monitoring the delivery of sustainable solutions, within a sustainable development umbrella.
- The Chair of the New Countryside Agency will be the Rural Advocate.

Why is it needed?

- The concerns, needs and interests of rural people, communities and businesses need to be articulated to, and understood by, Government and other decision-makers.
- The delivery functions of the Countryside Agency potentially distract and affect its impartiality as advocate and watchdog – the New Countryside Agency will have a focus dedicated to providing challenge to Government and fresh thinking on rural solutions.
- The innovation pilots that the Countryside Agency has carried out to date need to be mainstreamed as part of devolution of decisions and delivery (see the regional prioritisation factsheet).
- The establishment of Defra in 2001 brought rural affairs to the heart of government, creating potential overlap with the role of the existing Countryside Agency. This needs to be eliminated to provide greater clarity of roles and accountabilities.

What will it do?

- The New Countryside Agency will be a:
 - rural advocate, to listen and speak up loudly on issues affecting people, communities and businesses in rural England, and check that government is taking heed;
 - rural adviser, to act as a think tank on rural issues for Government, including through commissioning thematic studies and considering evidence from abroad;
 - rural watchdog, to monitor rural-proofing of mainstream policies and progress in the delivery of the Government's rural policies, including through its contacts at regional and local level, and to report on achievement on the ground, especially in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion.

¹ See Regional Prioritisation Factsheet.

How will the new arrangements be better?

- There will be a single, unrivalled voice concentrating full-time on rural communities and challenging government at all levels.
- Devolution of delivery functions will allow the new body to concentrate on its role as a rural adviser, advocate and watchdog.
- Devolution of funding to regional partners will allow them to join it up with mainstream help and services for rural people.
- Transfer of functions to the new Integrated Agency will ensure a more integrated approach to landscape and the natural environment, and a joined-up approach to achieving the social and economic benefits of well-managed, accessible countryside.
- Duplication and potential confusion will have been eliminated.

How and when?

The changes will be phased as follows:

2004: New Chair of Countryside Agency appointed

1 April 2005: The New Countryside Agency will be established as a distinct body, initially within the legal framework of the Countryside Agency. It will have a budget of approaching £10m. This will give it greater resources than high profile bodies such as the National Consumer Council. It will remain largely based in London at that point.

2006/07: The New Countryside Agency will be formally established in its new guise after legislation (subject to parliamentary timetable). It will be located outside the South East, in a lagging rural area, to strengthen its links with its focus of effort, and with its partners at regional and local level.

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