

Modernising Commissioning:
Increasing the role of charities, social enterprises, mutuals and
cooperatives in public service delivery

A Response by:



Rural Action East (RAE) is an independent registered charity and company limited by guarantee registered in England. It is a community led organization that works for rural regeneration across all six counties of the East of England.

RAE is the East of England umbrella organization for the Rural Community Councils (RCC): Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity, Cambridgeshire ACRE, Rural Community Council of Essex, Community Development Agency for Hertfordshire, Norfolk Rural Community Council, and Suffolk ACRE. It is a member of ACRE.

Rural Action East has three major strategic objectives:

- **Strategic Influence** - To proactively influence strategies, policies and decision making on issues affecting the quality of life for rural communities
- **Programme Delivery** - To manage and deliver contracts and projects for the benefit of rural communities
- **Strengthening the Network** – To improve the delivery of services to rural communities through support to a vibrant regional Rural Community Council network working effectively together for mutual benefit

Our overall aim is to build strong communities where local action can transform the outlook for rural quality of life. More information can be found at our web site www.RuralActionEast.org.uk.

Introduction

Under our first major strategic objective we see great importance in responding to consultations and gathering evidence from our members and their members to provide policy makers with the best guidance possible. We are also responding to the OCS Stronger Civil Society consultation which has similar messages from our network.

For this consultation we do feel that the timescales allowed were insufficient and badly timed to encourage response by civil society organizations, we hope that you have received wide response to ensure that the forthcoming white paper is well informed and inclusive of the constituents it hopes to inform.

Given the point above, we have chosen to answer the four main questions posed in the document and endorse the fuller responses supplied by other members from the ACRE Network¹.

The Paper

This Green Paper asks commissioners, civil society organizations and other public service provider's four main questions:

- 1. In which public service areas could Government create new opportunities for civil society organizations to deliver?**
 - a. We believe that the issue is not to create new opportunities for Civil Society Organizations but make those opportunities which are already there more accessible
 - b. We feel that there are many local and specialist services which civil society organizations, social enterprises and co-ops could run effectively and efficiently if commissioning is opened up to allow wider application.
- 2. How could Government make existing public service markets more accessible to civil society organizations?**
 - a. One of the main barriers to civil society organizations is the lengthy process and administration process which is a major part of the commissioning process, the trend has seemed to favor large organizations taking on large contracts especially those who employ teams of specialists to complete pre qualifying questionnaires and the full tender documentation
 - b. It also needs to be recognized that civil society organizations can work very effectively in partnership but to set these up can take longer than the time given for invitation to tender.
- 3. How could commissioners use assessments of full social, environmental and economic value to inform their commissioning decisions?**
 - a. Directly within our organization and as part of the national network Rural Community Councils are particularly concerned with ensuring rural communities

¹ <http://www.acre.org.uk>

are not disadvantaged by urban focused decision making, one tool we advocate to help assess fairness for rural communities is rural proofing, this means that an impact assessment is carried out (either a set of questions and desktop research or via consultation)

- b. We advocate the inclusion of place in any standard assessments as rural deprivation is often a hidden issue².

4. How could civil society organizations support greater citizen and community involvement in all stages of commissioning?

- a. Civil society organizations are already supporting and promoting community involvement. For the rural community council network we are concerned primarily with rural communities, however this includes settlements up to 10,000 populations this includes many small and market towns.
- b. We would like to support local authorities and other commissioners to use civil society organizations to really connect with the people they are providing services for. If commissioning processes are made more accessible then citizen and community involvement will organically grow as people feel more empowered and consulted they will step up to the vision of big society.

Finally we would like to see a firm commitment from government to include 'rural proofing' as part of the statutory equalities assessments which organizations will need to undertake as part of their applications this is a process widely advocated by rural organizations especially by the Commission for Rural Communities.

Generally we feel that the complexity of the application process should be representative of the service being commissioned and that the application criteria needs to be inclusive and flexible to allow all appropriate organizations to apply.

² <http://www.rural-evidence.org.uk/home/> a comprehensive database highlighting hidden rural deprivation

