



Giving the Rural Community Equality With it's Urban Counterpart

By Charlotte Kelly

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Introduction

“Urban yoof” seem to be something of a hot topic at the moment. Not a week goes by without a government minister announcing plans for a new urban regeneration project. New youth centres, renovated skateboard parks, political outreach schemes for the disadvantaged, all seem to be announced in an endless list of eye catching initiatives and proposals. These are doubtlessly very important but the vast majority of these schemes are urban-based and there is a real danger that there is an inequality of attention between urban communities and their rural counterparts.

Rural youth are the forgotten demographic group of this government. Commonly dismissed by the current government with misconceptions such as “snobby fox-hunters”, there is a danger of masking the true problems faced by rural communities and the political duty to address such issues. And this neglect of attention given to addressing young rural people issues can be witnessed in the rising rural crime figures which destroy the false myth of a safe culture represented and too often portrayed as idyllic rose-covered cottages situated in beautiful countryside.

Rural issues need to be properly understood if opportunities and political solutions are to be extended to rural communities. In this article I shall identify the main issues which I think are of concern to rural communities, as well as suggest some ideas on how to make the current situation better.

Housing and the Environment

One of the few problems that has been raised in the media and brought to the nation's attention is the severe shortage of affordable housing for first-time and young buyers in rural areas, particularly those of natural beauty. Due to the increase in second home buying many local first time buyers, particularly in areas such as the Cotswolds and Yorkshire Dales are being priced out of the market. Prescott and Brown inform us they have a clear solution to the problem- “build more low-cost housing.” This solution is both misleading and damaging to rural areas. Recent reports by the Caroline Spelman, Shadow Local Government and Communities Secretary, have shown that the £60,000 starter homes promised by Prescott will be of a low quality and only around 300 will actually be affordable, the rest not destined for first-time buyers.

Amongst young people also, environmental concerns are a priority, particularly for those who live in the countryside and are rightly proud of their local environment. Many of the promised new houses will be built on green belt (2,500 acres are built upon every year) and so, far from solving problems these houses will only further erode our environment and antagonise young people.

Public Services

Another of the principle problems for rural youth is the re-location of vital public services such as doctors' surgeries and police stations from rural areas into conglomerated services often situated many miles from the people they are intended

to serve. The intended reorganisation of the police forces, reducing the number of regional forces from 43 to 12 will only worsen the problem of removing local accountable Bobbies on the beat and replacing them with distant, centralised bureaucrats. Problems with incidents of abusive behaviour committed by young people (which however minor over a long time seriously damage a community) in my own village cannot be responded to by a police force whom are based many miles away and rarely seen.

Local policeman who are known by the community and aware of young “troublemakers” in the village is a far more effective method of reducing crime than a distant police force regardless of their modern crime-fighting technology.

Hospitals have also suffered much the same fate of creeping centralisation. The local cottage hospitals have, in the name of centralisation and increased efficiency, been closed, disadvantaging the most vulnerable people in our communities, including the elderly, of an important service (and forcing them to make long journeys to their local hospitals).

The Community

There is also decay in traditional social groups such as Scouting and Church groups which bonded the community. These groups, along with small charitable organisations, often play a vital role within the community by actively involving young people. Red tape and excessive government bureaucracy however increasingly hinder them. The local playgroup, which offered an opportunity for parents support with childcare, is now burdened with regulations requiring carers to be vetted.

Local charities which provide help for drug abusers (a growing problem) have their requests for grants from the government refused because they don't provide a national service. People doing voluntary work in the community have to jump through ongoing hoops in having their benefits claims processed. Slowly these vital services are being chipped away by an overly metropolitan government. The contribution made by these enterprises in binding the community together must be recognised.

So, what can politicians do to help? Some of the help they can provide is startlingly simple- cheaper and more reliable public transport would do much to help alleviate the problems of young people in rural areas where there are few entertainments or constructive activity to engage them, encouraging vandalism and binge drinking.

On the issue of housing, certainly one of the most pressing for young people, I think we need to reassess the options we already have first, and only build new houses on greenbelt land if there is no alternative. The “Right to Buy” scheme, which provides a way for buyers of limited means to obtain a property as well as increase the pride shown by people with ownership over their council houses, is much neglected and eroded by the current government.

This I think would be a popular solution particularly amongst young people who otherwise face the prospect of renting for a number of years. This problem is particularly poor in northern areas which suffer from an excess of council housing stock. This, combined with a reduction in stamp duty for first time buyers and

possible tax breaks for low-earning young people, are far better proposals for solving the problem of housing than throwing up substandard new housing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, rural issues need to be properly understood and addressed if opportunities and political solutions are going to be extended to rural communities. The problems of increasingly remote public services such as police and hospitals coupled with a lack of affordable housing and a disregard for the environment need to be addressed if young people, particularly in rural areas are to reengage with politics.

However, it is an understanding of the rural community and the particular issues this raises for younger people such as isolation and a lack of meaningful engagement, which is the key to rural communities being extended the same level of attention and opportunities as their urban counterparts.

In particular, local charities and organisations which provide local services aimed particularly at the local community need to be protected and supported rather than strangled and diminished through excessive bureaucracy and over regulation.