MISSION 1

Devolution and Decision making

Devolution will fundamentally change the way decisions are made at a local level, with an impact on national policy too. This change could bring a number of opportunities if the devolution framework is designed to enable more effective engagement in the decision-making process for rural business and rural communities. This must also lead to local policy makers recognising direct and indirect impacts on the rural economy through a transparent process of rural proofing.

KEY ASKS

1. Put in place decision-making processes that are transparent, accountable, and allow for full engagement with the local community;
2. Create business boards and rural economic development committees for all strategic, mayoral, unitary, and combined authorities;
3. Ensure each devolved authority recognises the need for and adoption of a rural devolution model to protect both rural business interests as well as meeting the public service needs of rural communities.

1. Decision-making must allow for transparency, engagement, and full accountability

Devolution is often seen as both complex and opaque. This has made it hard to track whether rural needs and interests (and the benefits that can accrue from rural investment) are understood or given proper weight in decision-making. The decision framework set down in the Devolution Act should offer greater transparency, but it is not obvious it will be sufficient.

For devolution to bring clear benefits to rural economies and rural communities, there must be full democratic accountability. It is essential that strategic, mayoral, and combined authorities ensure that the decision-making process is inclusive and accountable to the local community.

The right delivery framework must be in place to ensure effective delivery, including the appropriate level of financial resources and data analysis. To work for rural areas, people with a deep knowledge of the rural economy and communities within the Strategic Authority

will need to feed into strategic planning, targeted local investment plan etc. This can be done through proper stakeholder engagement and use of central government statistics, but neither of these things will happen naturally. The CLA will need to ensure it is baked into the development of the devolution framework.

2. The creation of rural boards and advisory rural economic development committees

Devolution can meet the challenge for both rural business and rural communities – the lack of understanding of the rural economy and the unique issues faced by rural businesses.

Devolved decision-making needs to harness the experience and expertise of local and external stakeholders. Local panels (eg 'Business Boards') can identify the issues on the ground as well as acting as a link between the delivering authority and local businesses which prevents a policy vacuum. Together with Rural Economic Development Committees (REDCs), the Business Boards would both advise the policy process and underpin the more effective use of rural proofing.

In practice, the business boards and REDCs will have the objective of increasing the understanding of rural issues, provide the policy link between Local Authorities and rural businesses in order to prevent a vacuum and ensure more effective local ownership. Where business bodies already exist, REDCs would provide a point of co-ordination through monitoring and advice ensuring that local policies are sufficiently rural proofed.

All too often in the past, decisions that are made fail to consider the potential direct and indirect impact they may have on rural businesses and communities. Put simply, there has been a failure to rural proof decisions which can lead to a series of unintended consequences.

Moving to a more transparent and accountable system that enables a joined-up approach can underpin more effective delivery structures that benefit rural businesses and communities.

3. Co-ordination through a rural devolution model

Local Authorities need to recognise that devolution has to rebalance the relationship between rural and urban interests. A major problem has been that urban areas have often been prioritised to the disadvantage of rural businesses and communities. If the local rural economy is to promote growth, it must be given the economic tools to do so, together with a greater degree of local ownership. A recognisable and distinct rural devolution model would emphasise full engagement in the decision-making process, necessary co-ordination of policies to ensure effective rural proofing, and a process where devolution allows for consensual decision-making between central and local government.