

The first cut is the deepest

Funding for the rural economy is facing the squeeze from an unexpected quarter

The government has kindly taken on our debt for us, and rather than the great British public spending non-existent money the government have been doing it on our behalf.

Yet now the word is finally out and the word is "cuts". Departments which struggle to spend their budget allocation will quickly come under the knife. So will those with huge numbers of agencies and "non departmental public bodies" (NDPB's) which are perceived to be a poor use of money. These bodies seem to struggle with their role and purpose. Defra with no less than 76 NDPD, must surely be near the top of the list of cutback candidates.

Identity Crisis

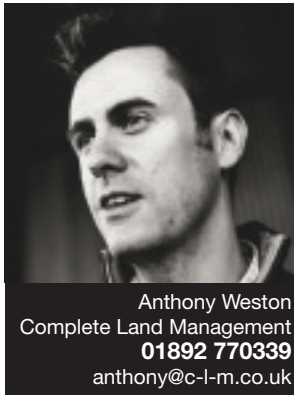
The Cabinet Office defines a NDPB as a "body which has a role in the processes of national Government, ...which accordingly operates to a greater or lesser extent at arm's length from Ministers". The cynic might suggest that this is merely a way of reducing the number of civil servants. (For those employed by a NDPB are classed as public servants not civil servants). This piece of sophistry aside it is easy to see how bodies like the Environment Agency, Regional Development Agencies and Natural England can quickly find themselves with identity crises. These bodies are set up to be conduits, a means of delivering government policy on the ground. Yet if they are responsible for delivering policy it would not be unreasonable to expect them to advise the government on how their aspirations can best be achieved. Does this advisory role include advising on future policy itself not simply on its implementation? If this is the case where is the line between advisor and lobbyist? The point here is that with



government cuts afoot bodies with unclear remit will surely come under scrutiny first. However these bodies risk being cut because of what they have become rather than what they were set up to be.

Strategic Thinkers

There is a lot to admire about those who are clear about their role, purpose and motivation in life. It would be fair to say that most farmers would consider their role as producers of food and custodians of the countryside. The weight given to the two pillars of their role will vary from farmer to farmer but make no mistake they will lobby hard to protect how they believe their role should be carried out. Between the policy maker and their conduits and those affected by the policy are the "tacticians". Those like CLM. Perhaps this is a bit pompous but the point is that we don't seek to influence policy or defend it, we look at policy, we look at our clients needs and we try to make sure that by understanding both of these points of view we come up with tactics to secure the best possible solution for the clients' business.



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Funding Gap

It will be all change in 2012 and we are busy working out our tactics to make the most of the policies in place now to maximise guaranteed income for farms. A general election next spring could well see a Conservative government which could change all that. Shadow Defra Secretary Nick Herbert, has said "We have a questionable situation where Defra quangos are lobbying Defra. The next Government needs to take a steely-eyed look at the work of quangos and determine what their roles really are." Could this mean that we see cuts in the availability of funding before 2012? There would be a certain irony in a new Conservative government causing a hiatus in the influx of cash to the rural economy because it didn't like the quangos who were handing it out.

Use it or loose it

The rural community needs to make the most of the opportunities that present themselves now, Natural England has £6.3 million to spend in the South East on 340 new HLS agreements by the end of the financial year. If we don't do our best to help them spend it can we rightly lobby for more money post 2012? or for a say in how it is spent? If it is left unclaimed and unspent now it will almost certainly be cut in the future.

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