The Story of RURAL COMMUNITY COUNCILS

MANY PEOPLE will know rural community councils and councils of social service by name and from contact with one or other of their diverse activities. Few will know how this movement had its first beginnings and came to occupy its present important place in the life of the countryside. Their establishment has been at the heart of the work of the National Council of Social Service for more than forty years.

The idea of joint action by government and the voluntary societies, in whatever social field, is widely accepted today but this has only noticeably come about in the years since the second world war. At the end of the first world war it was an idea in the minds of only a very few. They saw a number of voluntary societies developing their own work independently. They saw government departments responsible under statute for the country's broad social betterment. They conceived the idea of a joint approach to the work that was then being done, and joint consideration of the needs yet to be met. They brought into being the guilds of help which laid the foundations for the National Council of Social Service.

The National Council may be regarded now as the central voluntary agency for the co-ordination and promotion of the social services. Under its constitution representatives of government departments and the voluntary service agencies meet together to develop co-operation among the voluntary agencies themselves and between them and the statutory authorities. It has its counterparts in the towns and the countryside and in all of them the same representative constitutional pattern.

The policy of the National Council of Social Service to see such counterparts established in the counties of England and Wales, was financed at the outset by the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust. These county organisations were to be autonomous. They were to be representative of statutory and voluntary organisations. They were to co-ordinate the services that were being provided. They were to consider what gaps existed and to endeavour, either jointly or appropriately, to see them filled. And for the first three years of their existence they were to receive diminishing establishment grants from the Carnegie Trust. Local income was to be raised to replace the grants.

In those early days, although in almost every one of the twenty-four counties where rural community councils were set up between 1919 and 1937 the local education authority made a grant towards the cost, voluntary organisations expected less financial help from the local authorities, and individuals subscribed more readily to causes which had an immediate and obvious appeal. To replace diminishing grants with local income was by no means easy for organisations which appealed to the mind rather than the heart or the eye. Rural community councils were fortunate, therefore, at this time in being asked to undertake two tasks which were of obvious value to the countryside: the provision of village halls and the service for rural industries.

From the very beginning the National Council of Social Service had held the view that there could be no social or cultural life in a village without some suitable central meeting place. The Carnegie Trust supported the Council in this view and set money aside from which grants and free-of-interest loans could be made available towards the provision of village halls. The National Council was asked to administer these funds and the detailed work in the villages was undertaken by rural community councils.

The rural industries service dealt with ' trades ancillary to agriculture.' The importance of these trades both for the rural economy as a whole and in relation to the production of home grown food (proved without question during the second world war) had been foreseen. The Rural Industries Intelligence Bureau (now the Rural Industries Bureau) had been set up by the government of the time to provide technical advice and instruction for these trades. At first the responsibility for this work in the counties was undertaken by committees of county councils. But agriculture was at a low ebb and those engaged in the ancillary trades, if they were to

win an adequate livelihood, had to be persuaded to direct their skills to producing saleable goods: the blacksmith to wrought-iron work, the worker in wood to making furniture and to building, and the saddler to making leather goods. The disposal of their products was crucial, and rural community councils, because of their representative character and their contacts with many sections of the country community, were given the responsibility. Grants were provided by the Development Commission, out of funds provided by the Treasury, for the employment of full-time rural industries organisers: these organisers surveyed the trades in their counties and planned the provision of technical advice and instruction by the Bureau's peripatetic staff; and as time went on, exhibitions were held at county shows, valuable shop windows, as they proved, for the work of these struggling country tradesmen.

This work for village halls and rural industries had results that were plain for all to see. It eased the claim for local financial support, and gave substance to the pursuit of the original co-ordinating and pioneering purposes of the rural community councils. County conferences became a normal routine activity. Questions which touched the countryside at many points were discussed there. Between the wars the matters discussed included work among young people, the health services, unemployment registration in rural areas, the provision of playing fields, the preservation of the countryside, the extension of further education in villages and parochial local government. Important developments followed these discussions. Individual young farmers' clubs were established by rural community councils in collaboration with the university departments of agriculture until county federations of young farmers' clubs came into being in the nineteen-thirties; in Kent and later in Sussex a service for the after-care of tuberculosis patients was initiated; in Yorkshire during the period of unemployment in the mid-nineteen-thirties a voluntary system of registration for unemployed rural workers was introduced. And in many counties the establishment of county branches of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England and of the National Playing Fields Association was sponsored. But the most striking pioneering activity took place in further education and parochial local government.

It had been clear at the first discussions on further education, proof indeed in those days of the value of joint statutory and voluntary participation, that evening institute classes, although available, were being used to a very limited extent in the villages. Discussions

then probed the possibility of developing this statutory service: the sort of subjects that would be acceptable to country people, the sort of syllabuses that would be suitable, the availability of people competent to teach, willing to make the journeys involved and sympathetic to the rural temperament, and the problem of finding villages which could be persuaded to allow this experimental work to be tried. The outcome eventually was in fact a revival of village music and drama. The evening institute classes with which it began were quickly followed by one-day and week-end schools and by festivals and competitions. And in turn these led to demands for classes. Here was an educational service which had blossomed into a lively community activity and by the later nineteen-thirties had begun to awaken an interest in education for its own sake.

The revitalisation of parochial local government set a different problem. Parish councils and parish meetings had been in existence since the Local Government Act of 1894, but by common consent they were more moribund than alive. They had ceased to exist in Scotland in 1929. There were few people who could speak with authority about their powers and duties. There were few who believed that they had an effective part to play in the life of the countryside. But they were the local parish units of government most closely in touch with the people they were elected to serve, most likely to know at first hand their needs. Their potential was considerable. This was the problem rural community councils wished to face. At their request the National Council of Social Service set up a national Parish Councils Advisory Committee which issued leaflets about the work of parish councils and whose members gave advice on individual problems referred to them. In the counties, rural community councils organised area meetings for officers and members of parish councils. Gradually, as a result, the countryside began to see the importance of local government and the place of parish units in it.

This was the position reached by 1939. In twenty years, twenty-four rural community councils had been established covering twenty-nine administrative counties in England and Wales. Although they were known at this time, in the main, for their work for village halls, for playing fields, for rural industries, for music and drama and for parish councils, they had also served their original purpose and brought new needs to light and secured effective action. While they were known for what they did, the idea behind them had not been obscured.

The six years of war which followed equally saw for rural community councils a successful struggle for survival. Petrol was in very short supply and the personal visits and discussions in the villages on which the whole of the work had been based had to be severely cut. Only in the field of rural industries where the importance of the ancillary trades to an agriculture pressed to produce more food at home, could the work proceed with the same intensity. With the work for parish councils it was possible to do much by correspondence.

In 1946 it was in effect a new start that had to be made. The retention of rural community councils during the war years, the maintenance of the machine when all endeavour and most finance was directed to the war effort, had eaten into the small financial reserves that had been built up. The 1944 Education Act had placed the responsibility for the music and drama work which they had done squarely upon the shoulders of the education authorities. And in a country which promised the Welfare State the need for voluntary organisations at all was widely questioned. But at the same time the files in the offices of rural community councils contained evidence of greatly increased interest in the provision of village halls. Sums of money had been set aside in hundreds of villages as a result of the war-time ' weeks ': ' Salute the Soldier '; ' Warships,' Wings for Victory,' and there was a growing tendency to use this money to provide village memorial halls and playing fields. Agriculture continued to prosper and the ancillary trades, or those of them whose masters had moved with the times, provided a reasonable living for the owners and offered opportunities of employment for others. The demand for technical advice and instruction was greater than ever. The loan fund which had been provided at the beginning of the war to help these men to get up-to-date equipment was extended now to help them to provide workshops better fitted to their new tasks. And the parish councils which had been welded into associations, with their members enlivened by men and women returning to their villages the better for wider experience, were beginning to feel their feet and make their own way. Unless these three branches of rural community council's work were to be undertaken by the authorities, there was work to do even if the Welfare State removed the scope for experiment and pioneer work.

This was the feeling after the end of the war. But no move was taken to hand over the work of the parish councils to the county or

district authorities. No move was made to place the rural industries work elsewhere. And although the Ministry of Education assumed responsibility under the Physical Training and Recreation Act for making grants towards the provision and improvement of village halls, the circulars issued referred to the help that could be had from the National Council of Social Service and its associated rural community councils. The work in these three spheres was going on and rural community councils were doing it. The difficulty lay in the lack of financial resources.

It was at this time that the Development Commission threw rural community councils their life-line. The Commission had been connected with the rural industries work of rural community councils from its inception, providing grants for it and for the work of the Rural Industries Bureau out of the Development Fund. They had financed the Rural Industries Equipment and Workshop Loan Funds. In 1937, when the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust discontinued their establishment grants for rural community councils, the Development Commission assumed this responsibility. And now in 1947 the Commission, continuing to offer establishment grants, made available grants for the general community work of those councils which were suffering from the effects of the war.

The tasks that remained for rural community councils to do could now be undertaken without consuming financial anxiety. And the Welfare State, which it was once thought might make their existence unnecessary, began to provide new opportunities. Rural community councils were able, as neutral bodies, to promote conferences and regular consultation between all the local authorities of an area, the voluntary organisations and representative village people about such services as planning and health. They were able to provide for country men and women a personal service of aid and advice, making known to them the facilities which the local authorities could give, and to the authorities the special needs of village groups and individuals, and supplementing the statutory services by organising less formal activities. Rural community councils thus found themselves returning to their original purpose. New work developed as a result of their activity and their co-operation. County local history committees were formed. The initiative was taken in setting up county old people's welfare committees, and more recently committees for the care of the handicapped. Best Kept Village competitions, pioneered by the Gloucestershire branch of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, spread to

most of the counties in England and Wales. Experiments were tried in six counties in an attempt to establish whether country people need an advice service comparable to that provided for townspeople in citizens' advice bureaux.

The grants from the Development Fund were continued until 1953. Thereafter, as a result of a comprehensive review, grants for the general community work of rural community councils were promised for a seven-year period which ended on March 31st, 1961. Since then these grants have been renewed. They are based upon need and are contingent upon an appreciable contribution to the cost of the work by the county councils concerned.

The right relationship between the statutory bodies and voluntary agencies, although a relatively new issue in the sphere of voluntary service, lies at the heart of the problem of a healthy community, whether urban or rural. Statements in the Houses of Parliament have repeatedly supported this view. Its acceptance by local authorities is growing. This story of the development of rural community councils is a story of progress towards this relationship. Rural community councils exist as independent, non-specialist, informal bodies to try to ensure that suitable joint action is taken by statutory and voluntary bodies, or appropriately by one or other of them. They are in a unique position to identify, understand and have the needs of villages and village people met. Their traditional responsibility—as bodies to do pioneering work—is perhaps their most important function. To local authorities their value lies in their disinterestedness, their informality and independence, their need and ability to win confidence, and their capacity to experiment (and perhaps fail) and to mobilise voluntary action. They provide a powerful means, as their own story indicates, of perpetuating voluntary service.

Between 1946 and 1962 eighteen more councils have been set up and one has been extended to cover two more administrative counties. The latest two new county organisations began work for their local countryside in 1961: the Community Council of Devon and the Shropshire Council of Social Service. There remain now, in England and Wales, only nine counties, if Middlesex is excluded, which do not have a rural community council or a county council of social service. The extension of the National Council's counterparts into all the counties in England and Wales, hoped for more than forty years ago, is nearing completion.

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