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**Press release**

**26 January 2011**

**Research could help local authorities engage residents in Big Society**

Local Government could be making more use of research carried out by the UK Research Councils’ Rural Economy and Land Use Programme (Relu) to promote localism and the Big Society, say academics from the programme.

New legislation from the Coalition Government aims to change the way that services are provided and involve residents in developing and implementing solutions. But for many local authorities this represents a major shift and they will need to design new strategies.

Relu projects have carried our research across a wide range of challenges facing rural areas, and academics from both the natural and social sciences have worked with practitioners and local residents to investigate solutions. They have distilled principles for effective involvement, and identified opportunities where local government, as key organisations able to work at a landscape scale, could be taking a lead to promote sustainable action. These include initiatives such as greener energy production, reducing the impact of flooding, improving water quality and promoting local food.

Director of the Rural Economy and Land Use Programme Professor Philip Lowe said: “Good planning is obviously key and communities must be engaged at the outset, rather than as an afterthought. This requires appropriate and accessible information and it is important to have the right tools.

“A good example from the programme is a “report card” on water quality, designed by one of our projects, that provides residents with an annual, easy to understand assessment of the state of their river. It enables them to see whether resources have been spent effectively and to play a role in making decisions for the future. This kind of feedback is particularly important.

“Several projects have developed participatory geographical information systems that have proved invaluable. Hand-held devices enable residents and other stakeholders to feed in data during field workshops, which helps to create a shared understanding of landscapes and resources.

“It is also important to acknowledge that academics and professionals are not the only source of expertise. Another project worked with residents on modelling local flooding problems. Bringing people who have local knowledge into the modelling process meant it was possible to come up with a solution to a problem that had seemed intractable.”

Relu’s latest policy and practice note “[The Big Society: helping communities take action](http://www.relu.ac.uk/news/policy%20and%20practice%20notes/24%20Big%20Society/PPN%2024.pdf)” may be downloaded from the Relu website.

Notes for editors:

1. The Rural Economy and Land Use Programme is an interdisciplinary collaboration between the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), with additional funding provided by the Scottish Government and Defra. See [www.relu.ac.uk](http://www.relu.ac.uk) for more information about the Relu programme.
2. See Relu’s [Policy and Practice Note No 24](file:///H%3A%5Cword%20documents%5Cmedia%5Cpress%20releases%5C2011%5Cfinal%20versions%5CBig%20Society%20and%20rural%20communities%20final.docx) for more information about recommendations for good practice on public involvement from Relu research. Hard copies are available from relu@ncl.ac.uk.
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