



The Labour Choice for Rural Communities

Rural communities are, by and large, healthier, better educated, happier and less likely to experience crime than those in urban areas. But rural Britain also contains pockets of deprivation, whilst housing costs are higher and average wages are lower in rural communities.

Labour believes that people living in rural areas deserve the same entitlement to excellent public services as those who live in towns and cities and should be able to enjoy a good quality of life in a pleasant local environment, with a decent home, good schools, and services that meet their needs. At the same time there are unique challenges for rural businesses and the nine million people who live and work in rural communities.

Labour is working to support strong rural communities by tackling unemployment, expanding rural economic opportunity, safeguarding rural public services, supporting affordable housing, developing rural business and industry, and ensuring a sustainable future for our farming and food industries.

We believe that many of the issues which affect rural communities need answers designed specifically to meet these needs.

So Labour will:

- secure the recovery by helping businesses at the heart of rural communities to continue and thrive, building a high tech economy with a commitment to universal broadband coverage, and building more affordable homes
- protect frontline services in rural communities
- support sustainable and profitable food, farming and fishing industries, working with everyone involved to secure reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and Common Fisheries Policy
- preserve and protect our countryside by enriching the wildlife and landscape that makes our countryside so wonderful whilst protecting it against flooding and adapting to climate change.

Securing the recovery

Rural communities have some of Britain's most innovative and entrepreneurial businesses that are at the heart of securing the recovery. There are one million businesses in rural areas, employing more than 5.5 million people, with a combined turnover of more than £300 billion a year.

We have doubled the size of Labour's Rural Development Programme for England. £3.9 billion has been allocated for the period between 2007 and 2013 to safeguard and enhance the rural environment and improve the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry.

Working with Business Link and the Regional Development Agencies - which the Tories would abolish - we have ensured that small businesses have the help they need. We will continue to provide specific support to rural businesses and communities.

Rural businesses need broadband connections in order to compete in the modern economy. To support these businesses, as well as those who live in rural areas, we will create a broadband levy on fixed phone lines to pay for the expansion of broadband to those areas that the market alone will not supply. Labour is committed to universal broadband access by 2012.

At the same time we are determined to support the local services that provide the lifeblood of rural villages. We have put in £150m a year to support some 7,500 loss-making Post Offices that would otherwise have had to shut. We will transform the Post Office into a People's Bank offering a full range of competitive, affordable products. We will introduce a universal service obligation on the banks so that all consumers with a valid address have a legal right to a basic bank account, and a right to redress if this is refused. Banks will have to publicly report on the extent to which they are under-serving communities.

We have launched a comprehensive package of support for community pubs. We have supported the work of the Plunkett Foundation which helps communities take collective ownership of shops that are the heart of their communities. Because of our help for community pubs, Plunkett will be able to extend their community ownership programme to pubs as well. We will:

- contribute to a three-year programme to help up to fifty pubs move into community ownership through the Foundation
- help to provide business support for community pubs by funding 'Pub is the Hub' to extend their support nationwide.

We will go further to ensure the heart of every village community is sustained. We will:

- ensure that planning policy and local planning practice protect those shops, pubs and community facilities that are the heart of our villages, hamlets and local shopping precincts so that these communities cannot be left without these essential services and facilities
- use the Rural Development Programme to help local people set up viable community businesses and co-operatives in these protected locations
- continue to support the imaginative solutions being developed in rural communities to provide local services from community pubs and shops to transport and renewable energy
- continue to listen to rural communities and work with organisations like Regional Rural Affairs Forums to make sure the voices of local people are heard in Whitehall and Westminster
- review how rural communities can make best use of this to sustain them and work to help communities implement the best ideas.

Cutting public spending now, as the Tories propose, risks derailing the recovery. It would mean taking demand out of the economy and delaying our return to sustained growth. That would make the deficit worse not better. We have a clear, tough plan to halve the deficit in four years when recovery is secured. And we have agenda to help local communities in rural areas be at the heart of that recovery. The Tories would abolish the Regional Development Agencies which drive investment into rural areas.

Protecting frontline public services

Labour will protect frontline spending on childcare, schools, the NHS and policing, and reform our public services to put people in control, at the same time as we meet our commitment to halve the deficit. That means that, unlike the Tories, we can guarantee one-to-one maths and English tuition for all 7 to 11 year olds who fall behind, maintaining funding for police officer numbers and offer a new pledge of a guarantee of cancer test results within a week.

We know that young people in rural affairs often find it more difficult to get work but we won't abandon young people to years on the dole. Instead we will:

- guarantee a place in education or training for all 16 and 17 year olds
- ensure young people aged 18-24 are guaranteed a job, work experience or training place if they are unemployed for more than six months
- expand the availability of apprenticeships, with up to 70,000 Advanced Apprenticeship places a year.

Labour's priority is to help families on middle and modest incomes to get on in life and to provide security for all families from when their first child is born to when they retire. For parents of one and two year olds, we will provide a new Toddler Tax credit of £4 a week for each child from 2012.

We will not tolerate anti-social behaviour. Our anti-social behaviour guarantee will insist that police and local authorities use every one of the wide-ranging tools and powers available to them in the fight against it. Where we need to go further we will, with new powers to tackle alcohol-related crime, and preventative measures such as Family Intervention Projects to deal with troublesome families. And we will provide the funding to maintain police and PCSO numbers with neighbourhood police teams in every area, spending 80 per cent of their time on the beat visible in their neighbourhood.

Making sure local families can afford to remain in their communities must remain a priority. More affordable homes will help rural towns and villages prosper, and provide an essential boost to local businesses. With more opportunity to stay in their own communities, young people and key public service workers will be less likely to leave for cities in search of cheaper housing and jobs. This is why Labour is investing in affordable rural housing. We are committed to our target of 10,300 affordable rural homes between 2008 and 2011. We will give a special planning power to parish councils to build up to 10-15 new affordable homes using "permitted development" rights if they so wish.

To take 9 out of 10 first time buyers out of stamp duty, Labour will introduce a two-year Stamp Duty holiday for first-time buyers on homes worth up to £250,000, funded by a higher duty on the most expensive properties.

Labour knows that the building blocks to securing the recovery and building a high tech economy start in the school. So we are raising standards in schools and we have given rural schools an extra £23 million cash injection to ensure all young people can benefit from Labour's new Diplomas. We will maintain the presumption against closing rural schools. And we will review funding for rural schools as part of a review of the Dedicated Schools Grant formula

Decent public transport is rightly a concern of people in rural communities, so that young people have the freedom to get to school, and everyone can get around. The extension of Labour's Concessionary Transport scheme across the whole of England in 2008 has allowed all older people and disabled people in rural areas to travel at discounted rates, and often for free, on their local buses. We have already put £57m for rural buses in the Rural Bus Subsidy Grant which provides additional bus services for rural areas. Now we will:

- make sure that the rural voice is heard when the Bus Service Operators Grant is reviewed
- include recognition that authorities might adopt area-based approaches in their planning to ensure that rural needs are met and that improving rural accessibility is a valid goal for these plans in the third round of Local Transport Plans, which will come into force from April 2011.

Labour will strengthen our society, by protecting the things people value and demanding rights and responsibilities from all. Our society is not broken; it is strong in many different ways.

Sustainable food, farming and fishing

We want British farming to be profitable and competitive. We need our farmers to produce more food, nurturing our countryside and biodiversity. The Government's publication of 'Food 2030' earlier this year - the UK's first comprehensive food strategy for sixty years - was welcomed by farmers, food industry and consumer organisations alike.

We have already reduced regulation. We know how hard farmers work to sustain the environment that they farm. Building on the lessons of the Campaign for the Farmed Environment we will work in partnership to help farmers produce more while impacting less on the environment.

We believe consumers have the right to know where food comes from. We are working with the food industry and retailers to ensure proper food labelling, including tougher and clearer 'country of origin' information. This will also help to level the playing field for British farmers.

An economically viable and environmentally sustainable fishing industry is vital for our coastal communities.

So to support a sustainable and profitable industry we will:

- work with the industry to eradicate the terrible disease of Bovine TB through the development of a badger and cattle vaccine and using the best available science
- continue to seek reform of the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) to facilitate the creation of fairer and better functioning agricultural markets, enabling farmers to return a reasonable profit from food production at lower cost to the consumer
- only regulate when necessary and keep regulations constantly under review
- create a Supermarket Ombudsman in order to protect farmers and food suppliers from unfair and uncompetitive practices by major retailers
- introduce cost and responsibility sharing for animal health
- support diversification by producing the first ever bio-economy strategy
- work with the industry to reduce carbon emissions by three million tonnes over the next decade
- help upland farmers, who manage some of our most wonderful but difficult landscapes, stay viable and maintain the environment with the new Upland Entry Level System
- work with the industry to implement the Agri-Skills Plan

- invest in research and development, including investing £10m in research into bees and pollinators
- improve productivity and domestic production in sectors on the model of the pigmeat taskforce and fruit and vegetable taskforce
- preserve and reform the Agricultural Wages Board to make sure agricultural workers continue to get a fair deal
- assess the national importance of the County Farm network for providing opportunities for young people to get into food production, and issue guidance for local authorities in how this asset is managed in the national interest
- work with farming groups and local councils to support new markets where local people want them
- push for fundamental reform of the EU Common Fisheries Policy ending the scandal of discards and linking up with wider marine policy and conservation objectives.

We can only get a good deal for British farmers and fishers, better labelling for consumers and higher environmental standards by fighting our corner at the heart of the Europe. The Tory policy of isolation will leave us helpless in defending our interests.

Preserving and enjoying the countryside

For millions of people the British countryside, and the parks and commons of our towns and cities, provide solace from the pressures of modern life. The riches of Britain's biodiversity - our native species, both rare and commonplace - depend on them.

We are committed not only to protecting but also to enhancing our natural environment, and enabling it to be enjoyed by all. The area of Green Belt has increased over the last decade - and we intend to sustain it. We will maintain the target that 60 per cent of new development should be on brownfield land.

We have created two National Parks in the New Forest and South Downs, and given the public a Right to Roam our mountains, moors and heaths. We will now extend this to the whole English coastline. These historic pieces of legislation will ensure that for generations to come, all are free to enjoy Britain's countryside, bringing with them the economic benefits of tourism on which many rural businesses and jobs rely.

The canals and waterways, designed to be the lifeblood of the industrial revolution, are now an incredible national asset for leisure, for nature and for economic development.

Our environmental stewardship schemes have improved the management of Britain's farmland, and we have seen the numbers of some of Britain's key 'indicator' species begin to recover.

Competing pressures - from greater food production to housing and natural flood defences - are making the management of land resources ever more challenging.

So we will:

- introduce a new framework for managing our land that can more effectively reconcile these pressures, building on the recommendations of the Lawton Review
- put forward new areas for protected landscape and habitat status, focusing on green corridors and wildlife networks to link up existing sites
- commit to increasing the area covered by forest and woodland
- work to develop a mutual, not-for-profit model for British Waterways

Labour remains committed to defending the welfare of animals, whether wild, domestic or on farms. We have legislated to ban cruel 'sports' such as fox hunting and hare coursing, toughened the sanctions against people who mistreat animals, and banned animal testing of cosmetics and barren cages for chickens, among other items. We will:

- ensure that existing animal protection legislation is rigorously enforced
- continue the review of wildlife crime legislation including the Hunting Act's code of practice to give animals appropriate protection
- stop the use of barren cages for gamebirds
- consider banning snares.

To help keep Britain clean and use our resources more sustainably, we will:

- use Labour's 'cleaner neighbourhoods' legislation to clamp down on litter, flytipping and vandalism by working with the local councils and the environment agency
- bring in new powers for vehicles involved in criminal flytipping to be seized
- move towards a 'zero waste' Britain by stopping recyclable and biodegradable materials from going to landfill.

We will ensure that country sports are protected while ensuring high standards of environmental protection, animal welfare and safety. Building on our continuing support for angling, we recognise the potential of angling – particularly for engaging young people in constructive activities. So we will support angling and responsible shooting. We will maintain the rod licence and the use of revenue from the licence to support the waterways.

Adapting to climate change and protecting against flooding

The devastating 2007 floods, particularly in Sheffield, Hull, Doncaster, Leeds and the Severn Valley, caused £3 billion worth of damage, affected 55,000 properties and caused the loss of 13 lives. In 2009 we saw the tragic effects of more floods in Cumbria. As a response, Labour has brought forward urgent legislation to provide better, more comprehensive management of flood risk and to help people protect their homes and businesses. This is one part of our wider efforts of making the people of England and Wales safer from flooding. We are committed to improve protection against flooding and coastal erosion, and are investing a record £2.15 billion between 2008 and 2011.

We will:

- bring forward further legislation to make sure our floods and water system is fit for purpose
- work with major public bodies to publish climate change adaptation plans
- give local councils a bigger role in promoting energy efficiency and in developing community energy systems such as renewables and district heating with new powers to sell electricity themselves
- support community organisations, co-ops and social enterprises to provide energy services, including lower prices through bulk purchasing, and the development of small-scale renewables.

