

The Rt. Hon. Matthew Hancock
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
London
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United Kingdom

By email

22 May 2020

From the Chairs of the Rural Coalition, Rural Health and Care Alliance, Action with Communities in Rural England, The Rural Services Network and the National Centre for Rural Health and Care.

Dear Secretary of State

Coronavirus and rural areas

We wrote to you on 14th April about the implications for rural communities as we exit from the current 'lockdown' and the need to consider both regional and urban / rural differences in the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. We stressed the importance of adapting the strategy for managing ongoing outbreaks of Covid-19 in a way that was sensitive to the differences between urban and rural areas. Since that letter, it has become increasingly clear that geographic variations in the nature and speed of transmission are not just significant, but that a localised approach to managing them is likely to become increasingly important.

Our organisations are at the heart of a number of England-wide rural networks and we are receiving growing messages of concern about the implications for rural areas of a one sized approach to managing the pandemic. Rural organisations, including local authorities, voluntary organisations and very local community groups, can bring a 'reach' into every part of rural England to assist with the next stages of overcoming the coronavirus and, through our networks, we can play a valuable role in the management and recovery process.

We welcome the appointment of the task force to take forward the test, trace and isolation strategy and, in particular, that a senior leader from local government will be part of this task force. We strongly urge you to ensure that the task force has the management of the pandemic in rural areas high on its list of priorities. In many rural areas health and care infrastructure has been eroded over many years and the services now available are limited and, therefore, the capacity to respond, should an outbreak 'take off', would quickly become very stretched.

The ONS has clear evidence that the infection is now present at a low level in almost every rural community in England, albeit in most areas limited by the current restrictions. It is too late to prevent it reaching rural areas through travel restrictions and we appreciate that people living in urban areas must have opportunities for access to open space and fresh air. Because of the dispersed and limited health and social care infrastructure, the emphasis on future management of the pandemic in rural areas will need to be focused on quickly preventing intra-community transmission as well as reducing, where possible, transmission from other areas. This means that we must make use of local capacity to identify outbreaks very quickly and to prevent them from spreading within the community. Rather than working through a nationally centralised

system; it will need an approach led through public health authorities at county level and implemented, in partnership with communities, as locally as possible.

We remain very happy to offer our knowledge and networks across rural England to support the national effort to tackle this crisis. With the gradual release of the 'lockdown' underway, it is even more essential that all available capacity is harnessed to enable rural communities and the rural economy to emerge from what, for some, may be an existential crisis. We would welcome an opportunity to discuss with you and your team how best we can offer our practical help over the coming weeks and months

As before we are copying this letter to the Rt. Hon. Robert Jenrick, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Minister for Rural Affairs, Lord Gardiner.

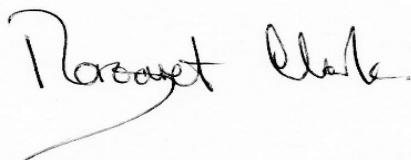
Yours sincerely



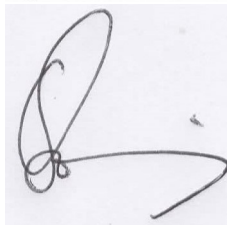
Councillor Cecilia Motley, Chair,
Rural Services Network (RSN)



David Emerson, CBE,
Chair, Action with Communities in Rural England
(ACRE)



Margaret Clark CBE,
Chair, Rural Coalition



Jan Sobieraj, Chair, National Centre for Rural Health
and Care

The Rural Services Network membership is over 120 local authority (counties, unitaries, districts and boroughs) from across England and over 85 other public, private and civil society sector organisations, such as fire and rescue authorities, housing associations, bus operators and land-based colleges

Members of the Rural Coalition are: Action with Communities in Rural England, Campaign to Protect Rural England (The Countryside Charity), Country Land and Business Association, Germinate: The Arthur Rank Centre, National Association of Local Councils, National Centre for Rural Health and Care, National Farmers Union, National Housing Federation, Plunkett Foundation, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, Royal Town Planning Institute, Rural Services Network, Town and Country Planning Association. The President is Rt Revd Dr Alan Smith, Bishop of St Albans

ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England) is the national body for 38 charitable local development agencies that make up the ACRE Network, which reaches 52,000 grassroots contacts and organisations in the 11,000 rural communities across England

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