

The Rural Coalition

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The Rt Hon George Eustice MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

05 May 2020

Dear Secretary of State

Getting rural Britain back to work

As the Government considers the options for scaling back some of the current Covid-19 restrictions, we appreciate that a strategic national approach will be needed to manage the potential risks and that it will be important to avoid confusing messages. However, we believe that applying a rigid one-size-fits-all approach will not work, especially in rural areas. The Rural Coalition has considered the particular impacts and circumstances affecting rural communities and economies and would urge the Government to take these into account when reaching decisions on the way forward.

If a gradual withdrawal of restrictions is to be effective, it must win the confidence and support of all communities and take account of the differences within and between them. To achieve this, the strategy must consider the implications for rural people and businesses and ensure the full engagement of local communities, local business leaders and local government in its planning and implementation.

The rural economy differs across the country; the opportunities rural areas offer for tourism, recreation and leisure vary widely; and their communities are as diverse as in any town. We urge, therefore, that any strategy for relaxing or lifting restrictions should take account of the following:

1. All businesses and community activities that create the possibility of social mixing need to carry out individual **risk-based assessments** and will need access to local support and tools to enable them to judge how to keep their customers, employees, visitors and volunteers safe. A flexible approach will be needed as premises, circumstances and local needs vary widely and businesses and community facilities in rural areas often provide a mixed range of services and do not easily fall into a single category.
2. In many rural areas it may be possible to restrict travel and social mixing in a straightforward, risk-based, way and combined with **local test/track/isolate initiatives and community-led support for vulnerable people**, it may be possible to loosen some of the current restrictions whilst keeping transmission rates low. The Government must work with local Public Health Authorities and local communities to achieve this. They will also be able to help communicate consistent public messages locally.
3. Rural people are, understandably, nervous about the release of current restrictions and about welcoming visitors or trade from other parts of the country because of the potential risk of a second peak of cases. They are particularly concerned that **local health facilities** have less capacity than those in urban areas and also may not have the sites to ensure a good 'separation' between CV-19 and non-CV-19 facilities. Government must reassure rural people that they have properly considered the likely impact on rural communities of any future strategy for managing an ongoing 'plateau' of cases in rural areas.
4. The support provided so far for small businesses, the self-employed and the voluntary and community sector has been most welcome and provided a much-needed lifeline. However, it is critical that this support remains in place for some time to come, especially in rural areas which are heavily dependent on small, local and community businesses and on the voluntary sector. **Underpinning businesses** that are crucial to the future of the rural economy, especially in the

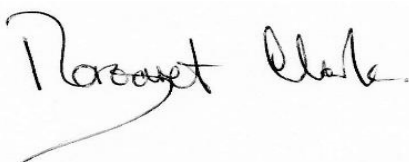
food, tourist and visitor sectors, will need to be phased out gradually, allowing time for trade to come back or to see them into next season, and regulation interpreted with greater flexibility over this period. The rural voluntary sector will need long term support if it is to survive and to continue to provide much needed help and services to rural communities.

5. Particular attention is needed to enable **rural young people and children** to benefit from any opportunities to continue their education and to overcome the problems that social isolation is having. At the same time, whilst it is essential to ensure that vulnerable people are safeguarded, many local services and facilities in rural areas are provided by **older people** (especially those that rely on volunteers) and national policies directed at particular age groups could have a disproportionate effect.
6. Rural communities will want to be reassured that, unlike previous crises arising from snow, flooding etc, the **connectivity of rural areas** will be addressed with renewed vigour. This is essential across the whole range of a modern community's existence – from telemedicine to children's homework, from contact tracing to flood management.
7. For the future, there needs to be a **national recovery plan with a strong rural component**, which
 - genuinely **engages rural communities** and is delivered locally.
 - Builds on the needs starkly identified by the crisis and ensures that rural areas are well serviced by modern **connectivity** in health and social care, education and other services
 - Capitalises on the renewed interest in **local food supply chains and food systems**, both for local areas and for the UK as a whole
 - Engages communities and places greater priority on **local community institutions and resilience** and less on central command and control.
 - Builds **resilience environmentally** and responds to public awareness and support for low carbon, environmental improvements
 - **Identifies and builds on the good things** that have been rediscovered and learned during the crisis
 - Reinforces the **links between rural and urban** communities and economies.

The Rural Coalition and its members are pleased to have been engaged in discussions with officials in your Department to assess the impact of the crisis on rural communities and businesses. Over the coming weeks we shall also be considering in more detail what we believe will be needed to ensure a proper rural dimension to any recovery plan, both for the medium and longer term. We look forward to continuing to work with you and your officials on the issues outlined above and the future needs.

I am copying this letter to Lord Gardiner, with whom the Coalition works closely.

Yours sincerely



**Margaret Clark CBE,
Chair, Rural Coalition**

Members of the Rural Coalition: Action with Communities in Rural England, CPRE – 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.

President: Rt Revd Dr Alan Smith, Bishop of St Albans