

# Rural issues in the Conservative Party 2015 Manifesto

## Information paper for the RSN Executive

This short paper summarises the coverage of rural issues within the Conservative Party's 2015 General Election Manifesto, which was entitled '*Strong Leadership, A Clear Economic Plan, A Brighter More Secure Future*'. It has been written to inform the discussion under a 'blue sky thinking' agenda item for the 22<sup>nd</sup> June meeting of the RSN Executive.

Appended to this paper is a table that was prepared earlier for the RSN. This lists the policy 'asks' in its own Rural Services Manifesto document and compares them with what the Conservative Manifesto said about those topics. It should be recalled that the RSN manifesto focussed down on eleven policy areas seen as a priority.

The Conservative Manifesto contained (page 21) a 'Rural economy and local communities' sub-heading. The text sitting under this referred to:

- Making the most of the economic potential of rural areas;
- Providing "near-universal" superfast broadband within this Parliament;
- Securing the future of the 3,000 strong rural Post Office network;
- Preserving community assets by strengthening the Community Right to Bid;
- Setting up a Pub Loan Fund to help community groups use that Right.

There were other passing references to 'rural' within this Manifesto. They appeared within text about broadband (again), farming, hunting/shooting/fishing and the natural environment.

Another way of looking at this is that it could be said there are Conservative policy commitments which match or are similar to a number of 'asks' in the RSN manifesto document. They include:

- Recruiting more GPs, assuming that some go to rural areas;
- Securing the network of rural Post Offices (again);
- Maintaining Winter Fuel Payments for pensioners;
- Strengthening the Community Right to Bid (again);
- Setting up a Pub Loan Fund, which offers communities seed corn funding;
- Confirming broadband initiatives and targets, though this could be stronger.

As can be deduced from the appended table, there are other policy topics with national policy commitments which could prove beneficial to rural communities. The extent to which this is so must depend partly on the effectiveness of Whitehall rural

proofing, to ensure they reach rural areas and are designed appropriately. Such policies include those on helping people access the housing market, improving access to health services, and supporting business growth and local economies.

At least two issues within the Conservative Manifesto seem to be causing some concern among rural policy practitioners. They are:

- Extending the Right to Buy to Housing Association tenants: rural areas have a limited social housing stock and this has shrunk as a result of the existing Right to Buy scheme (for local authority housing). Moreover, housing (un)affordability – or the ratio of prices to incomes – is particularly severe in rural areas. It is noted that this proposal is also likely to cause problems for rural ‘exceptions sites’ policies;
- Devolution proposals seem to focus on cities: unlike Manifestos from Labour and the Liberal Democrats, that from the Conservatives referred to (within-England) devolution only in terms of cities. Early announcements from the new Government about Manchester could be seen as pursuing that line, promoting city economic development and public transport coordination. That said, Cheshire East Council has expressed an interest in seeking devolved powers and resources, whilst the Chancellor of the Exchequer has said he is open to proposals.

As noted above, the Manifesto text about broadband might also be considered rather disappointing. Prior to the election the Conservatives floated the idea of reviewing the scope for a telecoms Universal Service Obligation upgrade, to include broadband provision at 5 Megabits per second. This did not appear in their Manifesto, which instead uses the phrase “near universal” superfast broadband.

Notably absent from the Conservative Manifesto was any specific mention of the allocation of funding to local government or indeed other local public services. There is, however, a commitment to review Business Rates which could have significant implications for the funding of local services.

From a local government perspective there will clearly be continued belt tightening. Local authorities will be expected to make further significant savings, including from service sharing/integration within and between councils. Council Tax will only be allowed to rise above a minimal rate if accepted through a referendum.

Finally, it is of course worth noting that the great majority of rural MPs in England are now Conservative. This is even more the case than it was after the 2010 election.

Brian Wilson  
June 2015

## Appendix: Comparison of Conservative Party Manifesto policy commitments with ‘asks’ that were in the RSN’s Rural Services Manifesto

| Topic                    | Summary of RSN asks   | Summary of Party Manifesto policies  |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| Planning system          | <p>Allow Local Plan flexibility to suit circumstances.<br/>           Allow longer to put Local Plans in place.<br/>           Give greater weight to draft Local Plans.<br/>           Revise how 5 year housing land supply is calculated.<br/>           Rethink exemption of self-build homes from CIL.<br/>           Confirm weight given to submitted Neighbourhood Plans.<br/>           Continue grant funding for NP groups and their LAs.</p>              | <p>Continue protecting the Green Belt and designated areas e.g. National Parks, AONBs.<br/>           Create a Brownfield Fund to unlock sites for housing.<br/>           Local authorities to create a brownfield site register and to give planning permission for 90% of them by 2020.<br/>           Support new Garden Cities where local people want them.<br/>           Give local authorities the main say on onshore wind farm applications.<br/>           Encourage communities to take up neighbourhood planning.<br/>           Require local authorities to allocate land where people can self-build or commission their own homes.</p> |
| Affordable housing       | <p>Reinstate a HCA rural target for grant funding.<br/>           Recognise rural premium in HCA grant levels.<br/>           Reverse small site exemption from affordable housing.<br/>           Exclude small settlements from spare room subsidy.<br/>           Allow LAs to suspend RtBuy policy in certain areas.<br/>           Balance need and local connection on waiting LA lists.<br/>           Funding to help HAs to invest in energy efficiency.</p> | <p>Extend the Right to Buy to Housing Association tenants.<br/>           Build 200,000 new homes for first time buyers aged under 40, offered at a 20% discount.<br/>           Make 10,000 new homes available at below market rents.<br/>           Extend the Help to Buy Equity Loan scheme, so 120,000 families can afford a mortgage.<br/>           Introduce a Help to Buy ISA to help saving for a deposit.</p>  |
| Local government funding | <p>Implement the pre-damped 2012 proposals.<br/>           Protect rural schools and that sparsity factor.<br/>           Monitor rural impact of Retained Business Rates.<br/>           Monitor rural impact of New Homes Bonus.<br/>           Compensate LAs for loss from infrastructure projects.</p>   | <p>Conduct a major review of Business Rates and implement changes in 2017.<br/>           Keep Council Tax down and referenda for larger increases.<br/>           Increase share of Business Rates retained locally from growth.<br/>           Review ways to reduce budget ring-fencing and centrally imposed burdens.</p>  |
| Public transport         | <p>Incentivise local partnership working to find solutions.</p>   | <p>Road and rail investment and upgrade programmes for the</p>   |

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|                                    | <p>Funding to take full account of the rural cost premium.<br/>         Extend concessionary fares scheme beyond buses.<br/>         Fund LA provision of transport for 16 to 19 year olds.<br/>         Protect BSOG from any further cuts.<br/>         Extend the Local Sustainable Transport Fund.<br/>         Remove any barriers to better transport fleet use.</p>  | <p>regions.</p>   |
| <p>Access to health facilities</p> | <p>Review CCG resource allocation to match demand.<br/>         Ensure more of NHS budget is spent locally.<br/>         Address recruitment problem with rural GPs.<br/>         Remove historic debt from small district hospitals.<br/>         Plan services taking more account of accessibility.<br/>         Meet ambulance response times in rural areas.<br/>         Invest in telemedicine and outreach approaches.<br/>         Resolve MPIG phase-out threat to some GP practices.<br/>         Put public health allocations onto a fair footing.</p> | <p>Fund and implement the NHS Plan to improve healthcare.<br/>         Prioritise 9,500 more doctors and 6,900 more nurses.<br/>         Introduce 7 day access to GPs by 2020 and improve hospital access at weekends.<br/>         Restore each patient's right to see a specific, named GP.<br/>         Integrate health and social care (retaining existing Better Care Fund).</p> |
| <p>Older people's services</p>     | <p>LA funding to take better account of sparsity costs.<br/>         Ensure care providers cannot cherry pick urban areas.<br/>         Care Act implementation to account for rural issues.<br/>         Offer more preventative care within GP surgeries.<br/>         Promote innovative service delivery models.<br/>         Support initiatives like Village Agents + First Contact.<br/>         Promote housing for rural elderly to live independently</p>   | <p>As above, integrate health and social care (retaining existing Better Care Fund).</p>  |
| <p>Fuel poverty</p>                | <p>Policy initiatives must suit rural circumstances.<br/>         Maintain value of pensioner Winter Fuel Payment.<br/>         Follow up NICE guidance in excess Winter deaths.<br/>         Apply Green Deal HIS scheme to LPG and oil boilers.<br/>         Press energy companies to meet ECO rural target.<br/>         Ensure energy saving advice reaches rural areas.<br/>         Promote Oil Bulk Buying schemes and similar.</p>   | <p>Implement the recommendations of the Competition &amp; Markets Authority about energy suppliers.<br/>         Set a goal to insulate one million more homes by 2020.<br/>         Protect the pensioners' Winter Fuel Payment for all.</p>   |
| <p>Viable village services</p>     | <p>Commit to there being no PO closure programme.<br/>         Evaluate and review the PO Locals initiative.</p>  | <p>Secure the future of the network of 3,000 Post Offices.<br/>         Strengthen the Community Right to Bid and set up a Pub</p>  |

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|                                   | <p>Invest in Community POs, extending the service offer.<br/>Public sector to see village outlets as an opportunity.<br/>Uphold Local Plan policies to retain village services.<br/>Act to save Royal Mail USO from being undermined.<br/>Review the Community Right to Bid initiative.<br/>Review pub leasehold and tenancy arrangements.<br/>Offer seed-corn (Lottery) funding to rural communities.</p>   | <p>Loan Fund for community groups using that measure.</p>  |
| Broadband and mobile connectivity | <p>Recognise key need for superfast broadband access.<br/>Make basic broadband target much more ambitious.<br/>Focus public funding on truly un-commercial areas.<br/>Set out strategy for reaching the remaining 5%.<br/>Lobby to relax State Aid rules in deep rural areas.<br/>Improve rural mobile coverage e.g. mast sharing.</p>   | <p>Confirms existing target for 95% coverage by 2017 and subsidy to install satellite connections elsewhere.<br/>Longer term ambition to roll out ultra-fast broadband.<br/>Confirms existing agreements with mobile operators to achieve 90% landmass coverage by 2017.<br/>Provide community access to free Wi-Fi in libraries.</p>  |
| Rural economy                     | <p>Acknowledge rural contribution in growth policies.<br/>LEPs should show how strategies will benefit rural.<br/>LEPs to monitor and publish their rural impacts.<br/>Growth Fund support should reach small businesses.<br/>Promote lessons from the Rural Growth Pilots.<br/>Fund LAs to work with Jobcentre Plus in rural areas.<br/>Continue funding for Wheels to Work coordination.<br/>Address geographic gaps in university/HE provision.<br/>Maintain funding support for land-based colleges.</p> | <p>Triple the number of start-up loans for 75,000 new businesses.<br/>Create 3 million new apprenticeships by 2020.<br/>Make further cuts to red tape affecting businesses.<br/>A Help to Grow investment scheme for business start ups and expansion.<br/>Deliver more bespoke Growth Deals with local authorities.<br/>As above, conduct a major review of Business Rates and implement changes in 2017.</p> |
| Rural proofing                    | <p>Recommit to rural proofing across Whitehall.<br/>Apply it to the 2015 programme for Government.<br/>Devolution to include shires (not just city-regions).<br/>Retain a rural proofing support team within Whitehall.<br/>Ensure Whitehall consultations include rural interests.<br/>Improve the Impact Assessment process.<br/>An annual rural proofing report should go to EFRA.</p>  | <p>Devolving economic and transport powers and funds to cities (other types of area not mentioned).</p>  |