

Rural England – A different place demands a different strategy

As the new year emerged into being, a group of rural campaigners began the preparations for The Rural England conference. By February the invitations from the conference host, Lord Cameron, were on their way to activists, experts, politicians and interested parties who, individually and collectively, could see the urgency of putting rural England back on the political map:

*‘As we approach the 20th anniversary of the last Rural White Paper, I hope you will accept my invitation to join with a range of rural advocates to consider how **a new Rural Strategy can deliver for rural communities in England** and to campaign to call on the Government to produce such a strategy.*

In England today the challenges facing rural areas often leave residents and communities feeling isolated and largely overlooked by a political system that is seemingly focused on urban areas. The reality is that nearly 20% of England’s population resides in the countryside, more in total than in Greater London.

There is a genuine need for their voice to be heard.

The term “rural” all too often conjures up imagery of idyllic countryside living. This stereotype is massively to the detriment of those living and working there, and does a great disservice to the genuine challenges they face.

*This event aims to champion **a new Rural Strategy** to rural proof all future national policy, to raise the profile of the communities of rural England and promote genuine equality for the next generation of residents living in rural England; they are as much citizens of England as any other. We expect to look at a range of issues, and opportunities, related to community and governance; connectivity and access; essential services and the role of the land, in developing the building blocks of **a new Rural Strategy**.*

*The country needs to have a means of making progress in addressing the travails and challenges for everyone post-Brexit. The opportunity of a **properly resourced, forward looking, ambitious and comprehensive Rural Strategy** can help us find a collective voice and form a vision of what we believe needs to be done to change the status quo. Rural citizens deserve better.’*

Lord Cameron of Dillington

Opening statements

To open the event a keynote speech was provided by Lord Cameron of Dillington followed by three perspectives from Parliament offered by:

- Rebecca Pow, MP for Taunton Deane
- David Drew, MP for Stroud, Shadow Minister (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs)
- Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville, Liberal Democrat Lords Spokesperson (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs)



Here we summarize the findings of the participants in this, the first *Rural England – A different place demands a different strategy* conference.

Highlights from the opening contributions

Participants worked together in table groups and spent a short time reflecting on the contributions of the four speakers, before beginning work on what they thought would help make, or strengthen, the case for a rural strategy. The following points were fed back as initial reflections from a number of tables:

- Rural has dropped off the agenda.... Where is the national political will?
- There is a need for greater, more coherent evidence of the rural case, a case that can be mainstreamed through data use and comparison (e.g. to urban equivalents)
- Quality of access to public services is declining, what's fair?
- How can we build an apolitical (cross-party?) approach?
- Who and how do we galvanize communities?
- What is the potential foregone?

Making and strengthening the case for a Rural Strategy

While some groups reports a view that the case had been made, some thought it had not (yet) been made, with views on how to make or strengthen the case, as follows:

Opportunities foregone...

Why should rural young people not have the opportunity to achieve? Why should much achievement or measures of 'success' be based on moving away? (n.b. *'The Shepherd's Life'* James Rebanks).

Opportunity denied is inherently unfair, while rural communities have their unfair share of deprivation and poverty, albeit less visible than may be the case in urban areas. Do we, does Whitehall know the extent of rural 'disadvantage'?

A question of fairness

The rural population is more numerous than that of London, yet receives nothing like London levels of investment, transport provision, or access to services that Londoner would take for granted. It is time for equity of provision for all citizens, for example, a basic minimum infrastructure (including connectivity) entitlement.

Rural communities make a productive contribution to the nation, what might it be like with better, more sustainable support and investment? Can we create a clearer, shared reciprocal urban-rural view of England?

The importance of place

Is rural England a part of England, is it England or a separate entity?

The countryside as a place to live, work and play; not just to visit, rest and recuperate.... Or own a second home (thought can it be called a home if it is just someone's 'dedicated' dormitory?). Rural communities are more than the 'environment' and agriculture they have swathes of small businesses. They are also much more dependent on 'mucking in', on volunteers helping provide collective services, from shops to transport – they are capable communities that just need proper and fair resourcing.

Are the towns and villages of England too quiet, hidden and unheard? What would raise their profile that isn't dependent on a crisis or disaster? How much more could they add to the national story, to national success?

Hearing the rural voice

While data and evidence are important we also need real stories of the lives of people in rural communities to give meaning to the evidence; both would reinforce the nature and extent of the rural contribution to national wellbeing. What is our '*Blue Planet II*' story?

Does the urban majority have an unrealistic view of the so-called rural idyll? Or does public and media presentation create a false impression? How might that be more realistically portrayed, shared and understood?

Can we re-connect the urban dweller and the rural dweller, and address the apparent disconnect between their respective world-views (and values)?

Who speaks for rural England, do we need our own Tzar. . . and how can each and every community have a greater say in their own destiny, empowered and properly resourced.

Addressing the causes

A lack of sufficient and specific rural data, evidence and analysis that follows, coupled with an overly centralized machinery of the state means the issues and needs of rural communities are poorly understood. Comparison with urban could help. Whitehall departments clearly don't have a coherent collective view of rural issues and in some cases have counter productive policies. Policy for rural communities falls through the cracks, and is no longer rural proofed.

An holistic view might see that poor transport links depress people and their prospects, unlike the existing siloed approach.

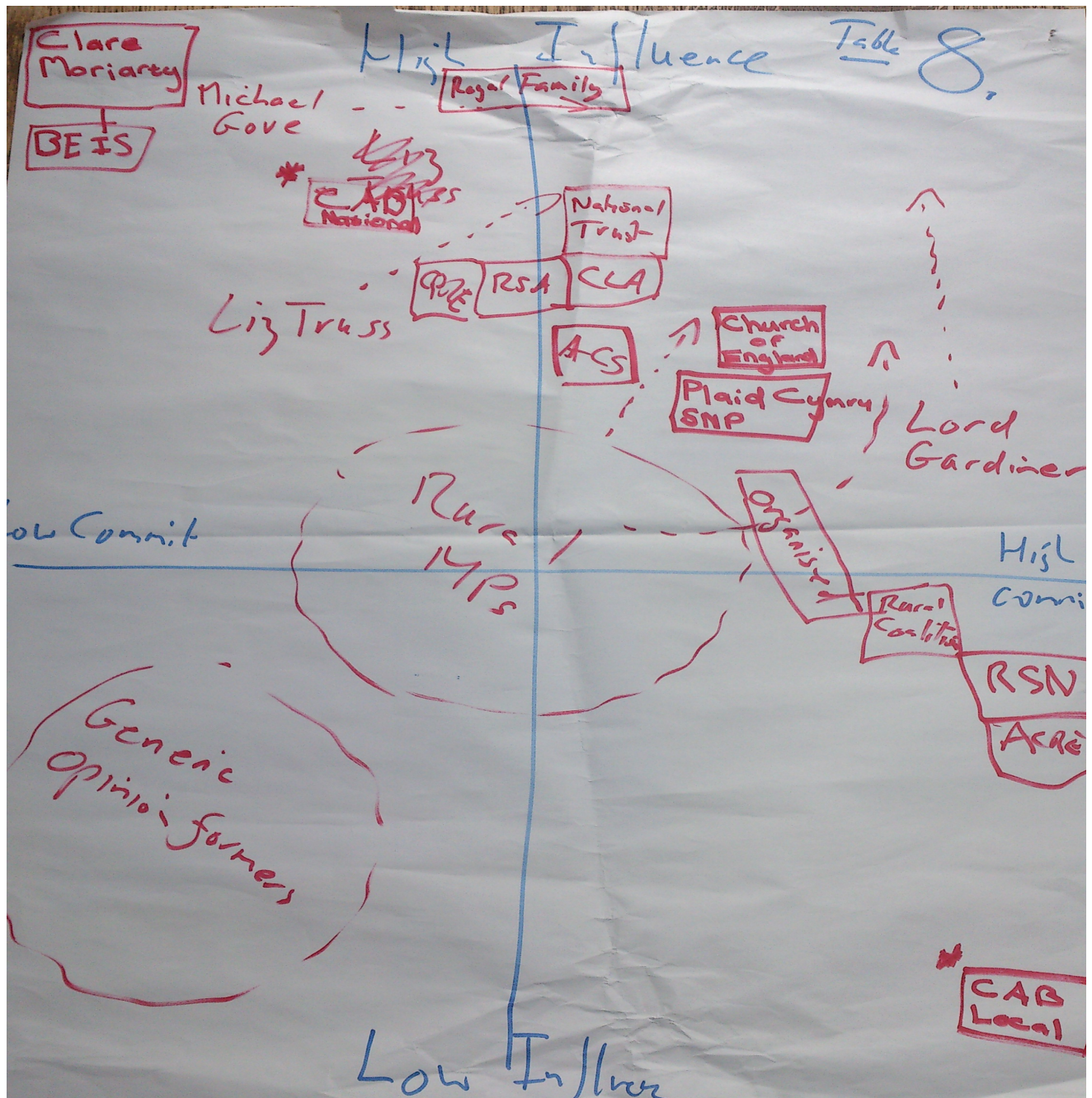
How might rural areas be better, more sustainably supported and funded? Sustainable resourcing would be a powerful catalyst for all that already exists, from the SMEs to the volunteers, the community spirit to the 'mucking in'.

What if there wasn't a coordinated cross-departmental rural strategy?

Would rural communities decline, or specialize, or be preserved in aspic? Why would you want to stay in your village, where might 17% of the population go, and what would that mean for urban services and resources?

Engaging and winning support for a Rural Strategy

Working in groups participants were asked to map potential support for a Rural Strategy on a degree of commitment vs. degree of influence grid. An example of their work can be seen here:



The classic analysis of such a grid suggests it is for the highly committed (on the right hand side) to influence the less committed (i.e. those on the left of the grid), while those committed and less influential (lower right quadrant) can be made more powerful though collective organization.

Influence and commitment, an initial stakeholder analysis

Groups were asked to consider who needed to be involved, and whose support would aid the case for a rural strategy. All groups considered the influencing potential and degree of commitment for different organizations, and for categories of, or named, individuals with the majority of these being people in the public domain, or those holding some form of public office or role.

A wide-ranging discussion at tables, followed by plenary feedback offered up a plethora of named individuals or office holders. They have been approximately collated below by perceived degrees of commitment to the call for a rural strategy, with an assessment of greatest influence from the top working down, thus:

As yet low Commitment	As yet middling Commitment	High Commitment
PM		
	TV Chefs	Hugh FW
Defra SoS		
	Younger Royals	Prince Charles
HMT / Chief Sec to HMT	Defra	
	'The Archers' The Countryfile team BBC Rural Team	
Non Defra Ministers	The NFU, farming lobby	EFRA Select Cttee members, esp. Chair
Landowners	The Eavis Family, James Dyson	
	Inequality NGOS	
Mayors of England, LEPs	Local Authorities	National Park Authorities, rural community councils
Major political parties		SNP /PC
	Women's Institute	
MPs (in general)		Neil Parish, Sir Oliver Letwin,
	Interested TV celebs inc. Julia Bradbury, Jeremy Clarkson, Bill Bailey	Dawn French, Sir Ranulph Fiennes, Sara Cox, Deborah Meaden
Members (e.g. CPRE, NT)	NT	CPRE, ACRE, Plunkett, RSN
Jo & Joe Bloggs, voters		
	Coldplay, Sting, Mumford & Sons, The Wurzels	
Urban visitors		

Many groups noted the high commitment of our speakers.

In exploring an approach based on associating the rural strategy call with key high profile individuals, the discussion considered a number of other high profile 'causes' or activities ranging from Comic Relief' to Countryfile, from London to Devon, to reflect on which individuals were associated with each.

This highlighted that in the main such associations were given roles. One of the challenges for a campaign for a rural strategy is the scarcity of appropriate or relevant 'given roles', not least that the only government role is the Minister for Rural Affairs (& Biosecurity) in Defra, rather than a Minister for Rural England role, while noting that there is a Minister for London, and there have been Ministers for Portsmouth, for the Northern Powerhouse, for Cities, and for each of the regions of England (2007/10) in recent governments.

A general discussion on the potential impactfulness of different people, categories of people or holders of office touched on the following points:

- We need to think through who the audience is, for our call for a rural strategy
- What is our positive vision, and hence what sort of coalition of interests are we seeking to gather together?
 - Narratives themes for the vision could include fairness, doing rural communities justice, addressing bucolic stereotypes in the media, the changing nature of Britain, growing concerns about the climate emergency
- Do we need, or are we dependent on, a trigger, a crisis, to make this happen?
- Where should our focus be? Are we seeking to influence politicians and those that directly influence them and the political process (opinion formers, the media) or more broadly real people, the general public, and potentially specific groups within that. How might we mobilize real people, including the urban population?
- Some consideration was given to the need to engage and ally with urban interests, urban votes, extending to a view expressed by some that a successful rural call was associated with a unified view of England and the UK (especially post Brexit)
- Working with the political process that could mean seeking:
 - Clear commitments in political party manifestos
 - A commitment to cross-department working
 - Engagement with those currently powerful, as well as those we expect to emerge over time, it isn't a short term process
 - A group of rural advocate MPs
 - Greater clarity on the practice of rural proofing
- Working with real people and the public that could mean working with:
 - Existing networks in communities, e.g. GPs
 - Those representing specific interests with a rural dimension, e.g. NGOs working on inequalities

- Engaging those in the country, and those who enjoy (and value) visiting the country, what is the common ground between rural & urban?
- What is the role or contribution of members of the great rural/nature NGOs (e.g. CPRE, RSPB, NT)?
- In both the political and ‘real’ setting who carried influence on this question? We noted that often the unexpected or unusual suspects have greater impact as they would not be thought of as people who ‘*would say that wouldn’t they*’, for example Jeremy Clarkson as a rural advocate
- What existing activity of government could we build on? E.g. the Industrial Strategy of BEIS (we note the Fabians have called for a Rural Industrial Strategy - <https://fabians.org.uk/publication/labour-country/>)

Next steps

Graham Biggs of the Rural Services Network (RSN) encouraged [all to sign up](#) to the call for a Rural Strategy –

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/time-for-a-rural-strategy>

In addition he announced that the network and it’s collaborators would seek to hold a further number of Rural England Conferences across the country, so as to widen and deepen the engagement of communities and their representatives across England.

Details of these will be posted on the RSN website, you can sign up to receive the RSN newsletter - <https://www.rsonline.org.uk/tag/newsletters>

Appendix One:

Rural England – A different place demands a different strategy

Friday 8 March, Taunton Conference Centre, Wellington Road, Taunton TA1 5AX

*Coffee from 09:15 **for 10:00 start***

Agenda

- 10:00 Welcome and keynote address, Lord Cameron of Dillington
- *Rural England, a different place demands a different strategy*
- 10:18 Perspectives from Parliament on a rural strategy....
- Rebecca Pow, MP for Taunton Deane
 - David Drew, MP for Stroud
 - Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville
- 10:45 Initial group work at tables – considering the Parliamentary perspectives
- 11:00 Tea, coffee break
- 11:15 The case for a Rural Strategy?
- Table discussions: have we made the case, what would strengthen it?
- 12:30 Lunch
- 13:15 Winning support for a Rural Strategy
- Table discussions: how will we engage the right support?
- 14:30 Next steps – building the case and gaining support
- Table groups feed back in plenary
- 15:00 Panel discussion of the conference feedback
Including:
- Margaret Clark, Chair of the Rural Coalition
 - Tobias Phibbs, RSA Food, Farming & Countryside Commission
 - Graham Biggs, Rural Services Network and SPARSE- Rural
 - Lord Cameron of Dillington
- 15:45 Close

Appendix Two – Attendees

Name	Organisation
Cliff Andrews	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Neil Anderson	Taunton Deane BC and W Somerset Council
Baroness Cathy Bakewell	House of Lords
Janice Banks	Gloucestershire Rural Community Council
Graham Biggs MBE	SPARSE
Kerry Booth	RSN
Nick Bruce-White	RSPB
Nick Burclough	CPRE
Lord Ewen Cameron	House of Lords
Ian Cass	Forum of Private Business
Graham Clark	CLA
Margaret Clark	Rural Coalition
Danielle Cohen	Power to Change
Chris Cowcher	Plunkett Foundation
Dr James Dawkins	Citizens Advice
Cllr Stuart Dowding	West Somerset Council
Steve Dowling	Association of Convenience Stores
David Drew MP	House of Commons
Penny Evans	Wildlife Trust
Michelle Fincham	Home Energy, Calor
Chris Giles	Dartmoor National Park Authority
Martin Gorringe	Defra
Cllr Roger Hapgood	Taunton Deane BC
Tim Harrison	Citizens Advice
Dr Jane Hart	Rural England CIC
Chris Head	West of England Rural Network
Georgina Holmes-Skelton	National Trust
Dimitri Houtart	BBC Rural Affairs, Food & Env't
Liz Johnson-Idan	Chard Town Council
Olivia Kiff	Home Energy, Calor
Jeremy Leggett	ACRE
Hywel Lloyd	Facilitator, Facilitating the Future
Richard Nicholls	CPRE
Cllr Sue Osborne	South Somerset District Council
Cllr Richard Parrish	Taunton Deane Borough Council
Stephen Parsons	
Tobias Phibbs	RSA
Rebecca Pow MP	House of Commons
Richard Quallington	ACRE
Adrian Reeves	Home Energy, Calor
Alex Ross	Western Daily Press
Paul Simpson	Yateley, Darby Green & Frogmore
Tim Slattery	Apple FM
Matthew Uren	NFU

Jane Vaus
Rob Walrond
Janette Ward
Brenda Weston
Melissa Whittaker
Gillian White
Natalie White

Diocese of Bath and Wells
CPRE
Social policy research
Everybody "Get On Board"
Everybody "Get On Board"
Power to Change



This conference was kindly supported by Calor