



The  
Rural  
Coalition



# A Better Future for Rural England: An Opportunity for Change



For a Living, Working Countryside



# The Rural Coalition

## A Better Future for Rural England: An Opportunity for Change



More than one in six of England's population (9.7 million people) live in a rural settlement, some in small towns, others in villages, hamlets or isolated dwellings. Rural areas are also home to 549,000 registered businesses from across a broad economic base – 85% of them in non land-based sectors. The challenge for policy makers is to improve the prospects and opportunities for rural businesses, to increase the wellbeing of rural communities and to enhance the contribution that rural areas make to the nation. How the next Government addresses the needs and priorities of people and businesses in rural England will have a major impact on future wellbeing, not just for those who live and work there, but for the country as a whole.



The thirteen national organisations that work together as the Rural Coalition subscribe to a vision of a living, working countryside. As such, we believe that no-one should be unfairly disadvantaged simply because of geography and that every rural resident should have fair access to jobs, to housing and to basic services, whilst every rural business should have the opportunity to grow and prosper. This includes being able to share in the opportunities that arise from the transition to net zero.

To make our vision a reality would mean a sea change in the way rural areas are perceived and treated. It would result in significant benefits both to rural communities and to the nation as a whole, not least as rural-based businesses and their workforce are enabled to become more productive and competitive, and as they and rural households play their part in decarbonisation. However, achieving the economic and social growth envisaged will only

prove possible if there is a sustained implementation effort led by central Government and made across Whitehall departments. Much of that effort will need to focus upon addressing the structural inequalities, fragile infrastructure and economic weaknesses which characterise and hold back rural areas. It will require unleashing the potential of local institutions and communities and effective local leadership.



# With that in mind, the Rural Coalition aspires to a rural England where in ten years' time:



Businesses of all sizes have access to a skilled, local workforce and have options to grow through available finance, premises, training and advice.



Farming is a viable, multifunctional and stable sector, where businesses receive a fair financial return for the food they produce and environmental benefits they deliver.



Businesses have invested significantly in the green economy, creating productive and well-paid jobs for the future, whilst growing and diversifying local economies.



Housing across a range of tenures, including social rent housing, is meeting the need for affordable and accessible homes in local communities – smaller and larger – keeping them sustainable.



Businesses and households can all connect to next generation digital networks (offering gigabit broadband and 5G mobile).



Local transport networks, using new technologies and involving flexible transport models, enable all residents to reach employment centres and key services, not least healthcare facilities.



Health and social care services are accessible and delivered as locally as possible, whilst maintaining high standards, including care provided to people in their homes.



Young people can choose from a broad range of post-sixteen education courses all taught within a reasonable and affordable journey from home.



Public services and agencies are fairly funded, with the additional costs of delivery in sparsely populated areas fully recognised and taken into account.



Local communities are empowered to take more decisions themselves, with enough resources to enable them to improve facilities or tailor services to match their needs.

**However, action is needed quickly if rural areas, including peripheral coastal areas, are not to be left behind as the country develops new economic and social approaches to the grand challenges of productivity, climate change and globalisation. The outcomes, though, will include a rural England where communities and businesses are more prosperous, connected, sustainable and resilient.**

Ask people what makes England such a special place and many of them will cite the countryside, with its patchwork of landscapes and rural settlements. How else to explain its popularity for visitors or its regular appearance in lifestyle magazines? Understandable though such sentiment is, an unintended consequence is that rural areas as places where people live and where 3.6 million work are often overlooked, as are the inequality and poverty within many rural communities. Instead, cities and large towns are perceived as the places where poverty is found; where policy solutions or services should be based and where growth and prosperity will be generated. Fairness dictates that this centralised mindset must change if communities and businesses – irrespective of location – are to receive equitable treatment and have the chance to contribute fully to the nation’s future.

**The following policy principles, if widely applied, would guide the necessary step change that is required to bring about our vision and so lift rural England’s fortunes.**



## **Demonstrate leadership by producing a comprehensive rural strategy**

Central Government should create a cross-departmental strategy for rural England, setting out a vision and policy framework to deliver sustainable growth for its communities and businesses, and encompassing farming and environmental concerns. It should be led by a Minister at Cabinet level and supported by a fully funded action plan, with annual reports to monitor progress. This should be underpinned by developing indicators suited to measuring rural-specific needs. The approach would bring the required focus to address priority rural needs and ensure that ‘rural proofing’ is taken seriously across Whitehall departments. It would provide the impetus for applying the remaining principles.

## **Ensure fair funding which takes proper account of rural costs**

Government should acknowledge the range of extra costs associated with delivering services or projects in rural areas. To address this and ensure fair funding, it should revise the metrics used to allocate funds for public services and the criteria used to target policy initiatives. This will address the systemic gap between levels of public funding currently going to rural and urban areas. Unless this gap is closed it is unlikely the rest of our vision can be delivered.

## **Invest in rural infrastructure that is fit for the future**

Infrastructure in rural areas needs urgent investment so they are not left behind and can contribute fully to policy agendas such as the net zero transition and digital revolution. That requires clear plans to upgrade capacity and resilience of the electricity grid, roll out next generation digital networks and create fit-for-purpose rural transport networks. This must involve relevant parts of government, regulators and infrastructure businesses.

## Adapt and mitigate for climate change

Rural communities, land managers and other businesses need to see faster, co-ordinated action from government and agencies, at all levels, to address the growing challenges posed by climate change. This must bring interested parties together to balance and resolve sometimes competing land use and environmental goals. It should include protecting coastal communities from rising sea levels, managing river catchments to reduce flood risk, enabling local renewable energy production and safeguarding rural economic and ecological assets.

## Create the conditions for a prosperous rural economy

Businesses and employees need an operating environment which supports a healthy rural economy, encouraging business innovation and growth. This requires connectivity, premises, skills training and business advice. Another key component is providing more affordable, local housing for the workforce and their families, underpinning the economic and social fabric of rural areas. A prosperous rural economy creates a virtuous circle as earnings are then spent locally in shops, pubs and outlets.

## Design services so they meet rural needs

Service providers should take full account of the needs of rural users when planning and designing services. Service plans must avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and should, wherever necessary, adapt the way in which they deliver services, adopting good practice and innovation to ensure accessibility for rural communities and businesses, including those in remote locations. More integration across services could enhance delivery and bring cost benefits.

## Deliver services as locally as possible

Services should always be planned and delivered at as local a level as possible, thereby making them readily accessible for users, including those for whom mobility is an issue. Where there is an over-riding argument for delivery to take place at more centralised locations, solutions must be included to offer reasonable transport options to

users who have to travel some distance, at costs which avoid penalising them or deterring travel.

## Support the key contribution of the voluntary and community sector

Facilities and services provided (solely or in partnership) by the voluntary and community sector, in places where they would otherwise be inadequate or would not exist, should be properly supported and funded by the relevant authorities as an extension of their mainstream service. The voluntary and community sector must not be left unsupported, simply to plug gaps in provision or pick up the pieces in rural areas.

## Devolve decision-making powers closer to communities

Decision-making powers and responsibilities should be devolved to the most local level possible, alongside a strengthened and better resourced parish councils tier and community sector. This should enable rural community representatives to have more say about investment priorities, make it easier for decision-makers to consult local communities and businesses, and mean that services are better tailored to rural needs and circumstances.

**To implement our vision requires action and commitment across sectors and at many levels, but central Government retains a vital leadership role and its willingness to apply or, in some cases, lead on adopting these principles will be crucial. It is, however, essential too that they are applied by government, agencies and service providers at all spatial tiers. Regulators also need to play a more significant role in ensuring that the needs of rural people and businesses are met.**

**The thirteen organisations which comprise the Rural Coalition stand willing to work with politicians, government departments and agencies to help bring about a better future for rural England. To assist this, they are able to call upon their own extensive membership and rural networks, operating at different levels, to gather local intelligence and to provide practical action and advice.**



# Rural England in figures: the current position

Population  
**9.7 million**

Residents who live in rural England  
Source: Defra

Business  
**549,000**

Number of registered businesses in rural England  
Source: ONS

Productivity  
**15%**

The amount of England's productivity (GVA) coming from predominantly rural areas  
Source: ONS

Farming  
**53%**

The amount of farm business income deriving from direct payments (subsidy)  
Source: Defra

Housing affordability  
**9.2**

Lower end rural house prices as a multiple of lower end rural earnings  
Source: DLUHC

Heating homes  
**25%**

Per cent of homes in predominantly rural areas that are off the mains gas grid  
Source: Dept for Energy Security & Net Zero

Broadband  
**Rural = 37% Urban = 76%**

Premises with access to gigabit connectivity  
Source: Ofcom

Public transport  
**73 small towns**

Defined as 'transport deserts' in south-west region alone (out of 110 total)  
Source: CPRE and CBT

Health care  
**51%**

Rural residents more than one hour from a hospital by public transport  
Source: Department for Transport

Post-16 education  
**52%**

Rural students more than 30 minutes from further education by public transport  
Source: Department for Transport

Local authority funding  
**£135 per resident**

Government gives 38% more funding for services to urban than to rural authorities  
Source: Rural Services Network

Community-run shops  
**92%**

The survival rate for community-run shops (despite recent economic challenges)  
Source: SRUC and Plunkett Foundation

# Members of the Rural Coalition



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### Rural Coalition President:

Rt Revd Dr Alan Smith, Bishop of St Albans

### Rural Coalition Chair:

Margaret Clark CBE

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### Members of the Rural Coalition:

- Action with Communities in Rural England
- Arthur Rank Centre
- Country Land and Business Association
- CPRE – The Countryside Charity
- 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



[www.ruralcoalition.org.uk](http://www.ruralcoalition.org.uk)



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## **The Rural Coalition**

The Rural Coalition is thirteen national organisations who subscribe to a vision for a living and working countryside in England. Given many shared values, we seek to be more influential by joining in common cause.

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**For a Living, Working Countryside**