



RURAL SERVICES NETWORK

Revitalising Rural

Realising the Vision



The RSN Campaign Revitalising Rural Realising the Vision, sets out 14 policy areas and for each, several Asks of Government. This document brings together all of those Asks in one document.

Contents:

[Rural Fair Funding](#)

[Rural Digital Connectivity](#)

[Rural Transport and Access to Services](#)

[Access to Rural Health and Care Services](#)

[Rural Schools and Community Facilities](#)

[Rural Economies](#)

[Rural Planning](#)

[Rural Further Education, Training and Skills](#)

[Parish Councils and Rural Community Action](#)

[Rural Town Centres and High Streets](#)

[Availability of Rural Affordable Housing](#)

[Managing an Older Rural Population](#)

[Sustainable Farming and Land Management](#)

Decarbonising Rural Communities and Economies



Rural Fair Funding

Public Sector Funding: public services should be fairly funded to ensure that additional costs of delivering rural services are recognised and adequately funded to ensure that rural areas are not left behind in levelling up England.

Recognising rural need: Government should take full account of the needs of rural areas, their economies, and their communities and that the impacts of any measures flowing from it are both proportionate to rural areas and properly rural proofed.

Public and mental health services: in the light of recent experience, Government should give more prominence to public health and mental health services. Both need better resourcing to become more accessible in rural areas. Historic funding allocations for public health cannot be justified and need an urgent overhaul to even out provision. Good practice in rural provision of mental health services needs active promotion and encouragement. Large disparities in numbers of mental health professionals working in rural and urban areas need resolving.

Social care provision: Government should implement the findings of its Fair Funding Review to help level-up the provision of social care services in rural areas, taking full account of their delivery cost in more sparsely populated areas. This would also enable improved or more consistent engagement with and commissioning of 'low level' support services for vulnerable rural residents, which are typically delivered locally by voluntary and community sector organisations.

Rural schools: the revised National Funding Formula helps to compensate many rural schools for the relatively high underlying running costs (per pupil) that small schools inevitably face. It should, however, be set to allow for more than minimum staffing levels. A share of the capital funding pot for school modernisation and maintenance projects should be set aside for small schools. They often lose out, with capital spending focused on larger projects at urban schools. Government should support and offer some funding to help collaboration or clustering between small rural schools, so they benefit from shared resources and expertise.



Rural Digital Connectivity

Broadband USO: the Government should urgently direct the industry regulator, Ofcom, to review and upgrade the broadband Universal Service Obligation, which (at 10 Mbps) is out-of-date and inadequate for, what have become, some everyday essential uses. To reflect the new normal the USO should be upgraded to superfast broadband download speeds of 25 to 30 Mbps minimum. Costs passed on to consumers seeking a USO connection must be reasonable. This would level the playing field for rural residents and businesses until gigabit-capable connectivity can be rolled out.

Gigabit-capable connectivity: the Government goal for universal gigabit-capable networks, achieved with public investment to ensure their roll out in unviable rural areas, is welcome. However,

announcements in late 2020 that 15% of premises will be excluded from the 2025 target and that firm public funding for that period is reduced from £5 billion to £1.2 billion are hugely disappointing. Published procurement plans make clear that it is premises in highly rural or remoter areas which could again be left behind. This effectively abandons the outside-in approach which originally set out by Government in 2018. Government should work urgently with the telecoms industry to resolve any capacity issues and to bring forward the remainder of the £5 billion investment into the period to 2025. Digital connectivity will be key to levelling-up rural areas and their economies. All rural areas need a clear timetable for when they will receive gigabit-capable connectivity and remote areas with the worst connectivity should be first in line for that public investment.

Mobile networks: the Shared Rural Network initiative, to plug gaps in 4G provision, is helpful, if not a total solution. Delivery of this initiative must be carefully and transparently monitored by Ofcom, to ensure that network providers are on track to meet their objectives and targets. Options should also be explored to address any remaining mobile ‘not spots’ by 2025. Government should announce some further rural trials to pilot 5G connectivity within health and social care provision.

Digital skills and inclusion: Government should announce a fully funded Digital Inclusion Programme, so no citizens (rural or otherwise) are left behind due to their lack of online skills or their inability to pay for basic equipment and connection charges. Key strands are likely to include training and the recycling of IT. As recently highlighted by the Communications Consumer Panel, the Covid-19 experience has brought home just how important this issue now is, with some left isolated and struggling to access basic services, such as shopping, banking, education and health care. Although it will require national resource, this should be a locally delivered programme, involving statutory, private and voluntary sector organisations working in partnership.



Rural Transport and Access to Services

Covid-19 support: in the short-term Government must retain its emergency financial support for public transport networks, so that rural bus and rail routes survive whilst pandemic restrictions are in place and whilst passenger confidence remains low. A significant public information campaign is required as soon as social distancing restrictions can be further relaxed to re-assure people about safety and encourage them back onto public transport.

Since the RSN made this ask, the Government has announced that it will continue its emergency funding until no longer needed. Bus operators receiving the funding are expected to work closely with local transport authorities to agree service levels that respond to passenger demand and enable social distancing.

Bus route provision: Government must ensure that its planned National Bus Strategy has objectives for rural provision, with ambitions to better serve rural communities and their economic needs on a sustainable basis. A fair share of the extra resources now starting to flow must reach rural areas, to improve existing routes, restore valued lost routes and establish new routes where clear gaps exist. This must be backed up by ensuring predominantly rural local authorities regain and sustain their ability to offer necessary revenue support, which means Government implementing the findings of its Fair Funding Review and taking full account of the costs of rural service delivery.

Zero emission buses: as described in the section on decarbonisation, the high costs of introducing electric or hydrogen buses and their fuelling facilities could prove problematic in rural areas. The

Government's zero emission buses fund (ZEBRA) should target rural areas and a comprehensive review is needed of the electric grid and, where appropriate, hydrogen supply, to address that risk.

Community transport: The Rural Mobility Fund is useful, if modest in its scale. Lessons from that Fund's current round should form the basis for a larger funding pot which is sustained over a longer period. It should, especially, promote the use of community and demand-responsive transport schemes which serve outlying settlements and feed into bus or rail routes. App-based journey planners and booking technologies should be piloted to attract new users, as should through ticketing between transport providers. However, in many rural areas this may require improvements to mobile connectivity.

Cycling and walking: Government should recognise the potential to improve cycling and walking infrastructure in rural towns, to nearby villages and in urban fringe areas. This can reduce car dependency and improve access to rural employment, services, and retail centres. Funding streams being made available to develop such infrastructure must reach rural areas and not simply focus on larger urban settlements. The condition of rural roads needs addressing as it can be a barrier to cycling.



Access to Rural Health and Care Services

Access and travel to hospitals: local health partnerships (STPs and ICSs) and trusts should take better account of accessibility and transport availability when drawing up plans to reconfigure acute and emergency services at their main hospital sites. This should address access for patients, visitors, and staff from rural locations, including those without a car or those unable to drive. It is especially important for patients whose treatments require a regular visit. Hospital transport schemes should also be made more widely available. This and other issues would be easier to address if funding allocations to local NHS areas were better aligned with the costs rural areas typically face from serving an older aged population. The hospital building programme should be used to improve access to hospitals in rural areas which are not well served.

Primary and community care services: local health partnerships should seize opportunities to create locally based multi-disciplinary teams and to develop health hubs in rural town locations. Hubs should aim to make a wide range of treatments and services more accessible to nearby rural populations, thereby avoiding the need for many patients to travel to main hospitals. They should provide services such as minor procedures, diagnostic tests, baby clinics, rehabilitation, and re-enablement. Local pharmaceutical services need to be retained in rural areas, which in some cases means supporting dispensing GP surgeries.

Public and mental health services: in the light of recent experience, Government should give more prominence to public health and mental health services. Both need better resourcing to become more accessible in rural areas. Historic funding allocations for public health cannot be justified and need urgent overhaul to even out provision. Good practice in rural provision of mental health services needs active promotion and encouragement. Large disparities in numbers of mental health professionals working in rural and urban areas need resolving.

Social care provision: Government should implement the findings of its Fair Funding Review to help level-up the provision of social care services in rural areas, taking full account of their delivery cost in more sparsely populated areas. This would also enable improved or more consistent engagement

with and commissioning of 'low level' support services for vulnerable rural residents, which are typically delivered locally by voluntary and community sector organisations.

Workforce and recruitment: Government and the NHS should ensure that delivery of the NHS Workforce Plan includes an explicit rural dimension. Pay bonuses should be considered to attract recruits into those rural places with the highest vacancy and turnover rates. Medical training should include a rural placement, wherever possible, to give trainees exposure to work in rural settings. Similar initiatives are needed to cope with serious rural shortages in the social care workforce.



Sustaining Village Schools and Community Facilities

Rural schools: the revised National Funding Formula (NFF) helps to compensate many rural schools for the relatively high underlying running costs (per pupil) that small schools inevitably face. It should, however, be set to allow for more than minimum staffing levels. A share of the capital funding pot for school modernisation and maintenance projects should be set aside for small schools. They often lose out, with capital spending focused on larger projects at urban schools. Government should support and offer some funding to help collaboration or clustering between small rural schools, so they benefit from shared resources and expertise.

Since this RSN ask was written the sparsity factor within the NFF for running costs has been increased quite significantly, providing eligible small and remote schools with a more realistic sparsity sum of up to £45,000 in 2021/22.

Community enterprise: Government should incentivise more rural communities to support or manage local services. They should give funding to the advice services provided by organisations such as the Plunkett Foundation and Pub is the Hub, who enable village shops and pubs to survive and to be improved, not least where local communities take over and run them. It is vital that such community groups, often volunteer based, have access to grants to help them with their endeavours, especially where services would otherwise close.

Village halls: Government should make some additional grant funding available to the ACRE Network, to enable it to provide enhanced levels of support to village hall and community centre committees and trustees over the coming year. This could address their now urgent needs, which seem likely to include business planning, fundraising and volunteer recruitment. There is also scope to make small grants available to village halls to help them adapt and grow into multi-use hubs.

Post offices: Government should confirm its Network Subsidy Payment for the Post Office from 2021/22 onwards and should keep that payment at (at least) its current level. This modest subsidy is vital to sustain otherwise unprofitable post office services in remote rural areas and it recognises their social value. With more bank branch closures planned, it is also crucial to retain the rural Post Office network as a means for rural people to access cash.



Rural Economies

UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Levelling Up

Fund timing: it is disappointing that the UK Shared Prosperity Fund will not commence properly until 2022, leaving a gap after EU funds cease. However, it is now essential that lessons are learnt quickly

from those pilots run in rural areas under the Community Renewal Fund. Lessons from earlier funds, such as LEADER, should not be overlooked. That fund usefully supported locally-led ‘bottom-up’ economic development. New funding should support both start-up businesses and existing businesses with growth potential, as well as social and community enterprise.

Dedicated rural funding: Government should create a dedicated rural funding stream of a proportionate size within the overall UK Shared Prosperity and Levelling Up Funds, with resources which are ring-fenced for use on rural support. This approach will ensure that rural businesses and economies can benefit from the Funds in a way that is fair. It will also enable specific tailoring of that funding to be effective in meeting rural circumstances and needs. The lesson from the past is that without a dedicated rural funding stream larger urban projects often scoop the pot.

Funding level and targeting: Government should commit to matching or exceeding the level of resources that rural areas of England formally received under EU programmes (through ERDF and ESF funds, as well as from rural-specific LEADER and EAFRD funds). Any attempt to allocate funding in rural areas must take account of the scattered nature of their needs and should avoid applying urban spatial targeting approaches (such as the Index of Multiple Deprivation). A low productivity measure may be more appropriate.

Levelling Up Fund: it is vital that levelling up opportunities are available in rural as well as urban areas and resources should be designed to enable this. Many rural areas face real challenges and have missed out on previous investment initiatives. The initial bidding round of the Levelling Up Fund appears to have taken this targeting message on board. It is equally important, though, that the Fund: can be used for small (as well as large) investment projects; takes a broad definition of infrastructure, which includes investing to improve local government services; and makes allowance for the fact there may be higher costs per outcome in rural areas.

It is welcomed that the Levelling Up Fund has not been targeted solely on the basis of the urban-oriented Indices of Deprivation and includes use of a transport connectivity measure. This shift in approach is something which the RSN has campaigned for. Similarly, that some funding is being made available upfront to support bid development. That, too, is something the RSN has asked for, since many rural areas have limited capacity for this task.

Local Enterprise Partnerships and Local Industrial Strategies

Local Enterprise Partnerships: every LEP whose area includes rural places (even if these are not many) should have a rural representative or champion sitting on its Board. To harness input from a wider range of rural interests, all such LEPs should also have an advisory rural sub-group or equivalent that helps shape their strategies and programmes. The End of Year reports from LEPs should include information monitoring and publicly presenting their activities and outputs in rural areas.

Local Industrial Strategies: LIS documents now need some repurposing so that a key element becomes supporting the economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions. Every LEP whose area includes rural places should demonstrate that it has rural proofed its LIS document to take proper account of rural needs and to allocate a fair share of resources. Those LIS strategies must look to support smaller-scale projects, suited to rural areas, and must not simply focus on large infrastructure projects in or around big urban centres.

Growth and Diversification: LEPs should consider creating small-scale Local Growth Hubs at a market town level where their economic needs are more acute. More generally, LEPs should support the

diversification of rural economies, especially into growth sectors such as creative, digital and green energy. This would tap into their growth potential and create good quality jobs.

Rural Business Advice and Guidance

Covid-19 support: The Government Plan for Jobs 2020 included welcome measures to help businesses survive and retain staff, though some of its measures could have been more nuanced to better support rural business needs. Many small businesses have faced a long period of financial hardship and many consumer-facing businesses were greatly impacted by social distancing limitations. Government should ensure that some support remains in place whilst these businesses recover.

Targeting rural growth potential: Growth Hubs must ensure that they reach rural based businesses with their advice and guidance, including the self-employed, micro-businesses and social or community enterprises. Their performance metric should not simply be the number of rural businesses supported, but what different that support makes. They should consider having dedicated rural business support officers, who operate locally and have access to a wider network of specialist providers or advisers.

Specialist support organisations: Government should make grant funding pots available to the Plunkett Foundation and Locality, to help them provide specialist advice and guidance to social and community enterprises, many of them in rural locations and delivering valuable local services (such as community-run shops) to rural communities.

Exploiting digital connectivity: Advice and guidance should be widely available so that rural businesses can make better use of digital connectivity. This could help them take advantage of new opportunities and reach new markets. Advice could boost their digital skills, build their online presence, develop online selling, and ensure their online security. This must be backed up by actions to improve rural connectivity.

Peer to peer support: Local networks where rural based business owners and managers can meet should be encouraged and supported. Advice from peers is often of real practical value. On average rural businesses are less well networked than their urban counterparts. Peer support can be especially beneficial for recent start-up businesses if they can tap into the experience of those more established.



Rural Planning

Zoning in Local Plans: the PWP's (Planning White Paper) proposed division of land into three types of zones – Growth, Renewal and Protection – is simplistic and is unlikely to account for varying circumstances in different rural areas. Whether designation of many rural areas as Protection would enable their needs to be met depends on the detail of allowable development in such zones (which has not yet been defined). It is vital that such designation does not stifle all development or introduce arbitrary definitions of 'sustainable communities'.

Community engagement: PWP proposals to drop community consultation from the planning application process (except for technical matters) should be reversed. They will otherwise disenfranchise residents, Parish and Town Councils, and others with a direct interest. Inevitably,

many residents will not engage with technical Local Plan making processes but will engage when a tangible development proposal arises. Encouraging more digital engagement with the planning process is welcome, but non-digital input must also be retained. A digital only approach would exclude some from having a say, due to lack of digital skills, ability to afford IT or poor connectivity.

Neighbourhood planning: PWP proposals need to be clarified to offer a substantive future role for Neighbourhood Plans. They currently appear to see such Plans as offering design guidance for applicants, which alone turns them into little more than statutory Village Design Statements. The proposed changes also risk overwriting existing Neighbourhood Plans, into which thousands of communities have put immense amounts of volunteer effort.

Infrastructure Levy: PWP proposals to combine Section 106 and CIL into a single Infrastructure Levy, whilst having some good intentions, raise practical concerns and need amending. It is vital that local planning authorities have the ability to specify or secure affordable housing on development sites. They should also be able to decide the tenure of that housing, based on needs in their areas. A concern is that, currently, Section 106 agreements are the means to enforce local connection (where appropriate) and in-perpetuity arrangements, which ensure that affordable homes remain affordable and available to meet local needs into the future. It is critical that a legally enforceable mechanism is retained.



Rural Further Education, Training and Skills

Further Education: for rural young people three linked issues need addressing – travel options to access FE, the cost of that travel and the choice of institutions/courses available. Students aged 17 or 18 should be entitled to statutory free travel to FE colleges or schools, matching the existing scheme for those aged up to 16. This scheme should be fully funded by central Government.

Careers advice: the Government's Careers Strategy has gone some way to improving the advice on offer to pupils. Young people in rural areas need local access to impartial and high-quality careers information and guidance, to help them understand all post-16 opportunities. This will help to raise ambitions and better enable young people to navigate career pathways, so they can acquire the right skills. One challenge is ensuring that careers advisers understand opportunities within the land-based sector.

Skills Advisory Panels: these Panels need to recruit businesspeople who have knowledge or experience across a range of sectors and who understand the current skills policy framework. This should include representatives with experience of rural business needs. Their advice to Local Enterprise Partnerships needs to assess and highlight any specific skill needs of rural based businesses. It should support rural objectives within Local Industrial Strategies.

Access to training: with no centrally funded adult education budget, some colleges and training providers have been opting out of training provision for that population group. The proposed Lifetime Skills Guarantee should help. Government needs to show how it can financially support provision. It is important that courses are accessible to rural based businesses and their staff. Solutions could include providing outreach sessions at hub locations in market towns and making more training content available online, with rural connectivity a prerequisite.

Plan for Jobs: measures that are being introduced under the Plan for Jobs, whilst broadly welcome, need to be designed more carefully and flexibly so that they take account of rural circumstances and are accessible to rural clients.



Parish Councils and Rural Community Action

Parish and Town Councils: Government should instigate a review of eligibility to use the General Power of Competence, to see if more Councils could be equipped to respond to any future emergencies providing support to individual residents. Government should also remove its threat to impose referenda on Parish and Town Councils where they increase their annual Council Tax precept above a given level. It is unrealistic to expect these Councils to grow their roles, whilst at the same time tying their hands financially.

Infrastructure support: Government should increase the level of financial support it provides to infrastructure bodies, so they can help local rural community and voluntary sector groups to bounce back from the difficult period they have experienced in 2020. Many have faced extra costs and have lost income. Bodies such as the ACRE Network support such groups to recruit and train volunteers, to raise or bid for funding, to grow their management skills and to develop credible plans.

Good neighbour schemes: with increased funding from Government, support should be provided to encourage more parish councils and rural communities to develop good neighbour or befriending schemes, which support the wellbeing of vulnerable residents and which address loneliness or isolation. These volunteer-based schemes have a track record of working well in rural settings and the support they offer takes pressure off statutory services including the NHS.

Locally run services: guidance and access to funding is needed to help communities meet local needs and fill gaps in service provision. One approach which could be supported is the Single Point of Contact (SPoC), where an organisation manages the process of commissioning local services from the VCS sector on behalf of a commissioning authority. Having announced the Community Ownership Fund, Government should now review the Community Right to Buy, finding a way to strengthen the hand of communities that register an interest in buying a local asset. Too few such assets transfer to communities.

Since the RSN made its ask about the need for community funding to support locally-run services, the Government has announced the creation of the Community Ownership Fund.



Rural Town Centres and High Streets

Towns Fund and Future High Streets Fund: the selection criteria used for these funds discriminated against smaller towns and should be changed for any future bidding rounds. In particular, the decisions to exclude any town with a population below 5,000 and to place any towns with a population under 15,000 in a low priority category were unjustified. Also, the decision to prioritise towns experiencing known economic shocks or having known investment plans, thus favouring those with larger employers and with large-scale investment potential. The income deprivation measure, used as a key criteria, is misleading in rural areas, because it conflates residents who commute out to better paid (usually urban) jobs with those who work in lower paid local jobs.



Business Improvement Districts: a grant fund should be launched to help local authorities and their town centre business partners to develop more BID proposals for rural town centres. BIDs have been shown to be a useful response in many areas. However, drawing up such a proposal is an additional, substantive task for a small rural local authority team.

Bank branches: the code which banks follow before closing a branch needs strengthening, so that decisions can be challenged and reversed. Branch closures continue at pace and the self-implemented code is little more than a box-ticking exercise. The Payment Systems Regulator should follow-up its recent report on access to cash by monitoring the trend in rural areas. Alongside this, protecting the Post Office network is also very important.

ATMs: despite the rapid recent rise in cashless payments, rural people need free and local access to cash to go about their daily lives. Lack of free access impacts disproportionately on certain groups and many small rural businesses rely on cash. Proposals allowing retailers to give cash back without another purchase are welcome, but they will not provide 24/7 access. Government and bodies managing the financial payments system should consider changing how the free-to-use ATM network is funded. For example, the interchange fee could be set independently to reflect transactions costs fairly. A tiered system could be introduced, with lower fees for clustered city centre ATMs and higher fees to protect rural ATMs.

Public services: Government should implement the findings of its Fair Funding Review on the allocation of funding for local authorities, taking full account of the extra cost of service delivery in rural areas. This will benefit rural town centres by helping sustain public services (e.g. libraries), enable upkeep of the public realm and assist grant support for arts, heritage, sport, and leisure venues plus the voluntary sector more generally.

Planning: national and local plan 'change of use' policies need careful calibration, to enable vacant and underused buildings in rural town centres to find productive use as housing in appropriate locations and where little prospect exists of continuing retail use. However, policies must not undermine town centre vibrancy by allowing viable retail premises to convert simply for financial gain. Moreover, housing conversions must be to high standards.

There is also significant scope to boost the role of rural town centres by making them transport hubs and ensuring they benefit early from the roll out of ultrafast digital networks.



Availability of Rural Affordable Housing

Affordable housing quotas: Government should amend its existing policy on quotas. Local planning authorities should be able to require an affordable housing contribution from development sites building fewer than 10 dwellings (i.e. those building 5 to 9 dwellings) in all rural settlements with a population under 3,000 residents – or with a population density of less than 2 persons per hectare. Furthermore, those authorities should be able to require that the affordable housing be delivered on-site. The current system, where on small sites a financial contribution is required, the actual affordable housing provided can be some distance from the original contribution site, means the affordable housing funded can be far away in a different (larger) settlement.

Since the RSN made this ask the Government has announced that it is putting aside, for now, its Planning White Paper proposal to increase the development site threshold for affordable housing from 10 dwellings to 40 or 50 dwellings. This proposal could have proved disastrous for rural areas.

Grant funding: Homes England should increase the provision in its recently announced Affordable Homes Programme from 10% to at least 13% to match last year's delivery. Even this 13% needs to be increased over the life of the CSR, given that 17% of England's population live in rural areas. The programme should offer grants at realistic levels which are realistic to ensure good design and energy efficiency, and which recognise extra building costs typical on small development sites in rural areas.

Community-led housing: the Community Housing Fund, which offers grants and supports community-led schemes, has been useful, although the fund is stretched and could be increased. A share of that fund should be allocated to projects in rural areas, such as Community Land Trusts, Co-housing schemes and Self-build projects. This would restore an original rural objective of the fund.

Exception sites: the principle of delivering low cost housing suited to first time buyers is not disputed, especially if it meets rural needs of young families and essential workers. However, the proposed introduction of a First Homes tenure must not be at the expense of much-needed rural affordable homes for rent. Local planning authorities must, therefore, be able to set policies that require Exception Sites to deliver solely or predominantly affordable homes to rent in all smaller settlements (and not just those in 'designated' rural areas). Without that, landowners will inevitably be attracted to release land for more financially attractive first-time buyer homes.

Sales of affordable homes: Government should allow local authorities to retain 100% of the proceeds from Right to Buy sales (rather than the current 50%), so they can re-invest this to replenish the dwindling stock of affordable housing for rent. The local authorities also need time and the ability, where necessary, to allocate more support per unit. Lessons for rural areas must be learnt from the voluntary Right to Buy pilot scheme for housing association tenants, before any further roll out of that scheme is considered.

Since the RSN made this ask the Government has announced that it is extending the time period given to local housing authorities to re-use financial receipts from Right to Buy sales.



Managing an Older Rural Population

Build suitable housing: Government should ensure new housing suits the needs of an ageing population by strengthening national planning guidance or allowing local planning authorities more leeway to set standards. This should take proper account of the Lifetime Homes Standard - including through Building Regulations. Better planning should also deliver sheltered and supported housing to meet rural needs. Co-housing schemes should be promoted as places where older residents could benefit through mutual support, with scope to be service hubs for the wider community.

Adapt existing homes: funding for Disability Facilities Grant and other reablement measures should be increased, so that more people (most, though not all of them, older people) have a chance to benefit from home adaptations that help them to continue living safely in their own homes.

Offer travel options: Government should amend, with funding, the statutory concessionary travel scheme, so it fits the rural context. This would permit concessionary travel before 9.30 a.m., since rural bus routes run less frequently and waiting for a following service can be impractical. It would also extend concessionary travel to community transport schemes since many villages have no traditional bus route.



Refocus on loneliness: Government should recommit to its Loneliness Strategy, announcing continued funding for it beyond 2021. This should include a further funding round for local initiatives which can address loneliness in rural and other areas, such as good neighbour or befriending schemes. The role of face-to-face local shopping, banking etc. should not be overlooked.

Improve health and care visits: travel downtime for community health and care staff visiting patients in outlying rural areas should be taken fully into account and should not mean shorter visits. Emergency service call outs could be more efficiently handled in rural areas if services were more integrated. For example, creating specialist community paramedic roles or, for non-acute cases, allowing ambulance services to dispatch other health professionals.



Sustainable Farming and Land Management

Future farm support: Government should ensure that ELM payments are set at a level which rewards good practice. That scheme should be based on proportionate rules and administration. There is considerable scope for the agricultural sector to contribute to the UK's 2050 net zero target and to help realise natural capital benefits. However, it is equally important that home grown food production is valued and that all future Trade Deals do not allow lowering import standards which undercut home grown produce.

Diversification: the UK Shared Prosperity Fund should make grant funding available to farmers where they have well thought through diversification projects that enhance the wider rural economy. This could benefit from a dedicated rural funding stream (as recommended in the chapter *Rural Economies* of this document).

Local foods: greater effort should go into promoting UK products and encouraging local foods. The Red Tractor Assurance scheme is a widely recognised mark for UK products. Local produced food typically enables food producers to capture more of their value. Support could include small grants for product development and the launch of promotional campaigns.

Seasonal labour: Government should be more sympathetic to the seasonal labour needs of the agricultural sector. In 2020 the Pick for Britain scheme gave many UK residents a chance to work on farms. Nonetheless, Government should quickly develop policies which ensure an adequate labour supply, which could involve a greatly expanded SAWS scheme. The support for Agri-tech robotics and AI should also be increased.

Flood management: the Government's six-year programme to improve flood defences is welcome. Urgent action is needed in rural areas which have experienced serious flood events during the last few years. A timescale for the works should be provided to those rural communities.



Decarbonising Rural Communities and Economies

Economic growth programmes: all such programmes should include explicit objectives to support low carbon and net zero growth. Specialist advice and related grant funding should be made available for existing rural businesses to help them reduce their carbon footprint. Government should use its Covid-19 recovery package, *A Plan for Jobs 2020*, to improve energy efficiency in rural homes, especially off the mains gas grid. This would make them greener and easier to heat, whilst supporting green jobs for tradespeople in rural areas.



Housing and renewables: housebuilders, homeowners and landlords should be incentivised to install or adopt renewable or low carbon energy technologies, which would also help address rural fuel poverty. The target recently set for installing heat pumps is useful, but that technology will not suit some properties, not least many older and hard-to-decarbonise homes in off-grid rural areas which the Government indicates are a priority. The approach for retrofitting existing homes, including eligibility to access the Homes Upgrade Grant, therefore needs to cover other options such as biofuels and heat networks.

Housing energy efficiency: for maximum effect, the switch to renewables should happen in conjunction with making homes more energy efficient. The technology for housing development to Passivhaus standards exists, but the financial model needs development, not least in rural areas where development sites tend to be small and have fewer economies of scale. Some pilot exemplar rural schemes should be supported to test feasibility and improve viability of the approach, paving the way for commercial provision to such standards in future.

Electric vehicle charging: the funding recently announced by Government to make quicker progress with rolling out rapid charging infrastructure is welcome. It must, however, be used to improve the network of public charging points across rural areas (including those areas distant from motorways or trunk roads). Drivers in rural areas are more likely to travel further and gaps in the network are a practical constraint given typical ranges of e-vehicles.

Rural buses: introducing buses using electric battery or hydrogen fuel cell technologies involves significant investment, both in new vehicles and depot fuelling facilities. This may be hard to justify commercially in rural areas unless bus service patronage grows. The Government's ZEBRA funding scheme should specifically target some uncommercial rural areas. Current electric buses also have a limited range that will be inadequate for some rural routes. A comprehensive review is needed of the electric grid and, where appropriate, hydrogen supply to avoid punitive upgrade costs arising in rural areas.

Electricity network capacity: the path towards net zero will significantly boost demand for electricity, not least to heat homes and charge cars. Government and energy industry must ensure that electricity distribution networks, sub-stations and connections are made fit-for-purpose. This will be particularly relevant in rural areas, where infrastructure is often less robust.

Local energy networks: Government should provide gap funding to kick start the development of decentralised energy networks in rural areas, where they typically face higher costs due to serving low population and housing densities. This would support the growth of networks that are based on local renewable production or combined heat and power technologies. These could also help retain money within local rural economies and support local jobs.

Local services: it should not be overlooked that one of the most effective ways to reduce carbon emissions in rural areas is to retain and, where possible, grow locally based services, such as food shops, post offices, schools, GP surgeries and transport networks. Equally, that providing good digital connectivity will reduce the need for rural residents to travel and enable home working. Policies for public transport, digital, land use planning, community action, education and health all have a part to play.



The Rural Services Network

We are a membership organisation and we work on your behalf for rural communities.

The RSN is the national champion for rural services, ensuring that people in rural areas have a strong voice. We are fighting for a fair deal for rural communities to maintain their social and economic viability for the benefit of the nation.

Our membership comprises 116 rural local authorities plus over 210 other rural service providers and interest groups including Rural Housing Associations, Healthcare Trusts and Charities. We also have over 200 larger Parish or Town Councils in the Rural Market Town Group.

You can find out more about the RSN at our website
www.rsnonline.org.uk.

We always welcome new members and if you are interested in joining the RSN, click here for more information. [Join the RSN!](#)

Revitalising Rural, Realising the Vision

Revitalising Rural, Realising the Vision is a campaign run by the RSN, which sets out a number of policy asks in 14 key subject areas to help support rural areas to achieve their full potential, and to 'level-up' areas of historical underinvestment.

Visit www.rsnonline.org.uk/revitalising-rural