

Revitalising Rural

Realising the Vision



RURAL
SERVICES
NETWORK



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 over 100 rural local authorities plus over 200 other rural service providers and interest groups including Rural Housing Associations, Healthcare Trusts and Charities.

You can find out more about the RSN at our website www.rsonline.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.





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Introduction

At the outset of 2020 the Rural Services Network commenced work on this document, to identify policies and initiatives which would help rural areas realise their potential, thereby benefitting the communities who live there and growing the rural contribution to the nation's economy. In large part, this was intended as a constructive response to the Government's 2019 commitment to expand on its strategic vision for rural England and the measures being put in place to underpin that.

“Over the coming months, the government will expand on its strategic vision and set out how, working across departments and working with stakeholders, it is putting in place a range of measures to ensure that rural areas continue to thrive.”

(Government response in 2019 to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Rural Economy)

In a House of Lords debate (26th November 2020) the Rural Affairs Minister stated, “Our vision remains that rural communities should prosper, benefiting from the full range of Government policies designed to level up opportunity and take the country forward”. Whether that is the ‘strategic vision’ referred to above is unclear.

That remains a key purpose behind this document. However, no policy document can overlook the extraordinary events of 2020. Rural communities and economies have been massively impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and by the restrictions that were introduced to help contain it, hence why there is an additional urgent need to help rebuild our rural communities and revive our rural economies.

Context for this document includes the need to close the productivity gap between rural and urban areas, not forgetting that more people live in rural areas than in Greater London. That means supporting the creation of better paid and more secure jobs in growing sectors of the economy. That, in turn, requires rural areas to have fast and reliable digital connectivity, a well-trained workforce, good transport networks and tailored business support, amongst other things.

It is no coincidence that the policy topics covered by this document map onto “the five foundations of productivity”, which were outlined in the Government’s Industrial Strategy, those foundations being: people, infrastructure, business environment, places, and ideas. Each of these foundations need addressing to revitalise rural areas and to achieve their economic potential.

The Industrial Strategy also highlighted four “grand challenges” which could transform the economic landscape. These are: artificial intelligence and data, an ageing society, the future of mobility, and clean growth. Those challenges should also shape any credible rural vision. Not least, since – compared with urban populations – rural residents are more likely to be from older age groups and rural residents must travel further to access jobs and services. Equally, rural businesses should seek to reap benefits from the tech revolution and from green growth.

The RSN views two other significant policy drivers as being critical to revitalising rural areas. First, they must be supported to contribute fully to the Government’s 2050 target for the country to become net zero for greenhouse gases. Whilst this target has implications across the board, it must, in particular, shape ambitious policies for housing, transport and energy production in rural areas.

Second, rural areas must be supported to level up. Many rural places have lost out, not least in terms of employment opportunities, key service provision, transport networks and affordable housing. Too often rural areas have been overlooked by policies which targeted large urban centres. On many policy agendas, rural areas are handicapped by public funding allocations that work against them. The RSN, therefore, welcomes the Government’s commitment on levelling up in rural areas.

“This government is committed to levelling up all parts of the United Kingdom, not just investing in our great towns and cities, but also our rural and coastal areas.”

(‘Farming for the Future: progress report’, Department of Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, February 2020)

There is no explicit definition of levelling up given in the Government’s new National Infrastructure Strategy (or elsewhere). The objective of the new cross-departmental Levelling Up Fund, worth £4 billion in England, is to “invest in local infrastructure that has a visible impact on people and their communities and will support economic recovery”. It is stated that this is: “Open to all local areas with priority given to places in need, those facing particular challenges and rural areas that have received less Government

investment in recent years”. On the face of it most rural areas meet the headline definitions. To be transparent, Government needs to define these areas and the criteria for the decisions.

In this document we look at fourteen policy themes, which we believe need tackling through measures allied to a rural vision. For each theme we outline some policy proposals which we consider would make a material difference, addressing known challenges and opportunities. These were drawn up following engagement with a wide cross-section of our members, whose knowledge derives from their experience of policy delivery at national, local and community levels. The policy themes are listed in a table, below, showing their prime links (only) to the foundations of productivity.

Revitalising Rural: Realising the Vision Policy Themes		People (workforce)	Infrastructure	Business environment	Places	Ideas
1.	Rural Fair Funding					
2.	Rural Digital Connectivity					
3.	Rural Transport and Access to Services					
4.	Access to Rural Health and Care Services					
5.	Rural Schools and Community Facilities					
6.	Rural Economies					
7.	Rural Further Education, Training and Skills					
8.	Parish Councils and Rural Community Action					
9.	Rural Planning					
10.	Rural Town Centres and High Streets					
11.	Availability of Rural Affordable Housing					
12.	Managing an Older Rural Population					
13.	Sustainable Farming and Land Management					
14.	Decarbonising Rural Communities and Economies					

One stand-out point from this work is the inter-connectedness of the policy themes: indeed, the inter-relationship between economic, social, and environmental agendas. Rural economies are much more likely to thrive where there are also strong communities and a high-quality environment. Action is therefore required across a range of issues, which both directly and indirectly have a bearing on economic recovery and growth.

An equally important principle is that central Government should develop the vision and the policy framework, along with sustained financial support to enable the intended outcomes to be achieved. However, wherever possible policy design and delivery should take place at the local and community levels. It is at those local and community levels that specific needs and circumstances will be properly understood. Rural areas across England vary significantly, so policy delivery needs careful tailoring if it is to be effective.



In 2021 the Government intends to publish its multi-year Spending Review, (the 2020 Spending Review was for one year only) setting out Whitehall Departmental budgets and funding priorities for at least the next three financial years. The RSN now calls upon Government to ensure that rural needs from public policy are fully and fairly reflected in that Review, so that outcomes for rural areas can be proportionate. We hope that this will enable the policy suggestions in this document to be taken up, helping to realise the rural vision.