

Revitalising Rural

Realising the Vision

Summary



RURAL
SERVICES
NETWORK



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SUMMARY

The Rural Services Network (RSN) hopes to contribute to the delivery of the Government’s 2019 commitment, to “expand on its strategic vision” for rural areas, “working across Departments and working with stakeholders”.¹

When work commenced on this document Covid-19 was barely known about. There is, of course, now an urgent and additional need to help rural communities and rural economies to rebuild from the many and varied impacts of the pandemic and associated restrictions.

However, what must not be overlooked is that there has been a long term need to close the productivity gap between rural and urban areas. Amongst other things, that means supporting the creation of better paid and more secure jobs within growing sectors of the economy.

Pursuing this objective will support the Government’s ambition to level up those places which have been left behind – a description which can apply to many rural places, not least in terms of employment opportunities, funding for public services and service provision more generally, digital connectivity, transport networks and affordable housing.

Done the right way, pursuing that objective will also help rural areas to contribute fully to the Government’s target for the UK to become net zero for greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. It should include ambitious low carbon policies for housing, transport, and energy in rural areas.

Throughout this document we make the case for a fairer distribution of national resources to rural areas and for more nuanced national policies that reflect rural circumstances. In this document we mainly focus on the distribution of existing public resources, rather than additional resources.

Fourteen topics are covered by this document, which the RSN would hope to see reflected in a strategic vision for rural areas. Against each are some policy asks the RSN believes would contribute significantly to rural productivity, wellbeing, and sustainability. A few of those asks are highlighted below. The results of the Comprehensive Spending Review, due to be announced in autumn 2020, offers an opportunity to lay the financial groundwork for realising the strategic vision.

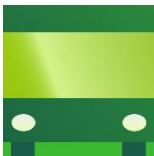
¹ Referencing page 3 of Defra’s *Government response to House of Lords report on the Rural Economy* (2nd July 2019).



Rural Fair Funding: Government should ensure rural areas receive a proportionate share when allocating public expenditure, as a matter of equity. It should implement the findings of its Fair Funding Needs and Resources Review for local government finance, taking full account of service delivery costs in rural areas. Funding formulae used for the NHS, public health, education and training, fire and rescue, and police all need reviewing.



Rural Digital Connectivity: Government should now formalise its commitment to bring forward the nationwide roll out of full fibre broadband networks to 2025. It should use the CSR to speed up the flow of public funding that it has accepted is required for roll out in uncommercial rural areas.



Rural Transport and Access to Services: Government must use its Better Bus Strategy to improve existing routes and restore valued routes that have been lost between rural towns. It should also expand the Rural Mobility Fund, so community transport solutions can be created to serve smaller rural settlements.



Access to Rural Health and Care Services: local health partnerships should seek to create health hubs in rural towns, providing treatments and tests which would otherwise require travel to a main hospital. The NHS Workforce Plan should specifically aim to address severe NHS staff shortages in many rural areas.



Rural Schools and Community Facilities: Government should direct a share of the capital funding pot for school modernisation to small rural schools that have lost out. Some extra funding should go to the ACRE Network, to provide expert guidance to village halls recovering from the pandemic and restrictions.



Rural Economies: The Government should take into consideration the particular nature of rural economies, which often feature SME's and sole traders to ensure that there are targeted policies and support to enable the overall rural economy to thrive. Available guidance should be tailored to help rural businesses better exploit digital connectivity opportunities and dedicated funding streams should be developed to target rural business.



Rural Planning: proposals to reform the planning system, designating three types of zone, are too simplistic and will not meet varying economic, social, and environmental needs in rural areas. Residents and their parish councils must continue to be given a say about planning applications.



Rural Further Education, Training and Skills: Skills Advisory Panels, which co-ordinate training, should have a representative with direct rural business experience (except in wholly urban areas). Government should fund extending the statutory free travel scheme for young people to 17-18-year olds at FE. Employment support measures in the Plan for Jobs need flexibility to be effective in rural areas.



Parish Councils and Rural Community Action: Government should review its Community Right to Buy policy, to help more communities take on and run local services (such as village shops and pubs). Modest funding would assist wider adoption of good neighbour schemes where volunteers support vulnerable residents.



Rural Town Centres and High Streets: to ensure that more places can benefit from it, Government should expand its Future High Streets Fund. It should offer feasibility grants for small towns. Planning policies permitting change of use need careful calibration to keep buildings in productive use, but not spark a sell-off of retail space.



Availability of Rural Affordable Housing: Government should allow local planning authorities to require a quota of on-site affordable homes from small as well as large developments in all parishes with a population under 3,000. It should also allow them to require exception sites to offer affordable rental homes.



Managing an Older Rural Population: national planning guidance should be updated to take proper account of the Lifetime Homes Standard, so new homes suit the needs of those with mobility issues. The statutory concessionary travel scheme for older people should be adjusted to reflect rural travel options.



Sustainable Farming and Land Management: post-Brexit funding for farmers, through the ELM, should be set at a level which rewards good practice, contributing to the net zero target and benefiting natural capital. Government policy should also value and promote home grown food production.



Decarbonising Rural Communities and Economies: Government should incentivise homeowners to boost energy efficiency by creating a Net Zero Retrofit Programme. This could also address rural fuel poverty. A funded strategy is needed to expand the network of public electric vehicle charging points along rural roads.