

RURAL LENS REVIEW



Build Back Better High Streets

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INTRODUCTION

The Build Back Better High Streets Plan published by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in July 2021 can be found [here](#). The Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) published alongside it a [Hospitality Strategy \(Reopening, Recovery, Resilience\)](#). Extracts from the Hospitality Strategy and subsequent RSN comments are also covered in this Rural Lens Review.

The Build Back Better High Streets Plan ***lacks any mention of the wider economic or social issue which are faced by people, businesses or communities in rural areas*** and which do themselves have an impact on High Streets – this is why the RSN continues to say “It’s Time for a (cross governmental department) Rural Strategy” and the need for our current campaign [“Revitalising Rural: Realising the Vision”](#) in which the RSN sets out a series of “asks” to government. “Asks” relevant to both the Build Back Better High Streets Plan and Hospitality Strategy feature in this Rural Lens Review.

Some of the content of the Build Back Better High Streets Plan is a re-statement of pandemic support the government has made available and or references the government’s proposed changes set out in the Planning White Paper. Where the RSN has already issued a Rural Lens Review of the policies etc. mentioned in the Build Back Better High Streets Plan or the Hospitality Strategy we provide links to relevant Rural Lens Reviews. In the main we concentrate our comments in the Deep Dive Section of this Rural Lens Review on proposals in the Build Back Better High Streets Plan which are new or different. Note, links to a full list of all RSN Rural Lens Reviews can be found on the final page of this document.

Where the Build Back Better High Street Plan refers to phrases such as ‘encouraging councils’ or ‘working with councils’ it ***clearly does not recognise the financial or capacity constraints of rural Councils***, we cover this in more detail in the Local Government Finance heading under the Scene Setting section of this Review.

Finally, the RSN’s overall concerns relating to both the Build Back Better High Streets Plan and Hospitality Strategy can be found in the next section – Key Rural Messages.

KEY RURAL MESSAGES FROM THIS REVIEW

The Government expresses its vision for High Streets as:

“We want to help every part of the country achieve the same: vibrant high streets where communities are at the heart of place-making; where a mix of commercial and residential uses complement each other; and where businesses large and small feel welcome.

We want to help areas create a vision that brings together planning, design and management of public spaces and local community assets to create local areas that promote people’s health, happiness, and well-being. We will be relentless in reducing the blight of boarded up shops, uncleanliness and disrepair.

To unleash places’ potential, we want local leaders to champion their communities and be confident and flexible in responding to change. Our Great British high streets are at the heart of this country and are the core of what reflects a local area and community”.

Which the RSN recognises as laudable and yet:

- No new money is detailed
- No rural proofing
- Does not recognise the financial and capacity constraints faced by rural Councils due to historic underfunding
- Feels very urban centric
- The importance of High Streets and historic market towns to the rural tourism offer is not particularly recognised
- There is no recognition that in rural areas High Streets are predominantly occupied by independents (SME’s and the self-employed) rather than the multiple or big business sector. These small local businesses are the heart and soul of rural economies and High Streets, as such government proposals need to be better nuanced to meet the needs and opportunities for these businesses.

SCENE SETTING

Local Government Finance

Rural local authorities, including Town/Parish Councils, play an important role in supporting the High Streets and in many cases also support local organisations in such activity. However, much of that support (which includes employee time), indeed support to economic development activity generally, is discretionary expenditure. In rural areas such expenditure has been under severe strain over the last decade or so through the “austerity years” and through increased costs of statutory duties. Those financial pressures are likely to continue for many more years to come. As a result, rural local authorities may have less resources and capacity to support the development of the rural economy and bid for Government funds.

In rural areas there will be many Towns within a District or County/Unitary Council boundary all fulfilling the same role to their business and resident populations and those of the rural hinterlands they serve.

Due to the longstanding underfunding of rural areas, we are now faced with a situation where the Local Government Finance Settlement for 2021-2022 shows:

- Urban areas in 2021-2022 will receive some 61% (£107) more per head in Settlement Funding Assessment grant more than their rural counterparts.
- Rural residents pay, on average, 19% (£96) per head more in Council Tax than their urban counterparts due to receiving less government grant.
- Rural residents fund 69% of their Local Government Spending Power through Council Tax compared with urban residents who fund theirs by 57%.

Due to a lack of Government Funding, rural Local Authorities are much more reliant on income from council tax to balance the books and fund services. Over the years, they have been forced to increase council tax to levels higher, on average, than those in urban areas. This has a detrimental impact on rural communities where they are paying more in council tax, from often lower than average wages.

Rural residents pay more, receive fewer services and, on average, earn less than those in urban areas and that is inequitable. This unfair funding of rural areas will impact on the funding support local authorities can give to discretionary activities.

Rural Proofing

The following is a quote (our use of bold type) from Defra's Report "Rural Proofing in England 2020" recently published.

"The process of rural proofing involves examining government policies closely from a rural perspective **throughout their development** and adjusting them as needed to ensure that their intended outcomes can be realised in rural areas.

Questions that may help inform rural proofing include:

- What are the intended outcomes for rural areas?
- **How might outcomes differ between rural and urban areas?**
- How are the outcomes to be delivered in rural areas?
- What are the potential issues and challenges?
- **How might the situation vary between different types of rural area?**
- What are the target populations and how might they be affected or disadvantaged?
- **In the case of funding, are rurality or sparsity taken into account?**
- **What are the dependencies, if any, with the responsibilities of other departments?**
- Which bodies could be involved in delivering the outcomes in rural areas?
- What evidence is needed?

We can see no evidence of rural proofing in this Build Back Better High Streets Plan or the Hospitality Strategy. In our view, it is not appropriate for Whitehall Departments to publish Green Papers or policy proposals or Consultations without considering the questions quoted above and then claim to have achieved rural proofing because those proposals receive responses from rural local authorities and stakeholders. Neither is something which is stated to have impact on rural areas rural proofed just because rural is mentioned (in this case just one use of the word rural in almost 10,000 words). Addressing the questions detailed above is paramount to rural proofing and is absent in the Build Back Better High Streets and the Hospitality Strategy.

DEEP DIVE INTO THE ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Build Back Better High Streets Plan sets out the Government's vision for thriving high streets in five key priorities, namely:

- Revitalising High Streets: Breathing new life into empty buildings
- Supporting high street businesses
- Improving the public realm
- Creating safe and clean spaces
- Celebrating pride in local communities

The Hospitality Strategy concentrates on COVID-19 recovery under the headings of

1. Reopening
2. Recovery
3. Resilience

Note, we have focused on areas that could impact on rural communities and service delivery. Where appropriate we have provided RSN comments and links to supporting information.

Many of the RSN's existing Rural Lens Reviews of recent Government policies, White Papers or Consultations are relevant in some ways to this Review. Where relevant we list these and include links throughout this Review.

Key Points from the Government's Build Back Better High Streets Plan		RSN Initial Comments
<p>Revitalising High Streets</p>	<p>Concentrates mainly on proposed planning reforms which the Government says have been 'carefully crafted to help high streets adapt to current challenges and flourish'. Proposed changes cited are (1) the ability for commercial, retail and certain leisure businesses to change use without permission – through the use of Class E (2) flexibilities to allow vacant and redundant free-standing commercial and light industrial premises, and residential blocks of flats, to be demolished and replaced with new high street homes on brownfield land through new permitted development (PD) rights (3) Article 4 directions by Councils can remove PD rights to change to residential if they are targeted, well-evidenced and apply to the smallest area possible.</p> <p>The government will explore what additional support measures might be needed to encourage temporary alternative use of property to help make sure they don't just sit empty and end up as local eyesores.</p>	<p>The RSN expressed many reservations about the proposals in its response to the Planning White Paper Consultation, click here to view. The Government has not yet issued its response to the consultation and until it does it is impossible to say if any of the RSN's concerns have been addressed – or will be addressed when the proposed Planning Bill is introduced into Parliament.</p> <p>Extensive use of Permitted Development Rights by building owner could incrementally change the very nature and functionality of rural high streets in unplanned ways without any controls.</p> <p>We are concerned that S106 Agreements are to be abolished. These legally binding obligations on the developer provide a range of benefits that mitigate against impact of new development, not just affordable housing. They do help secure rural affordable housing in perpetuity and for occupation for people with local connection to the community.</p>

<p>Improving the Public Realm</p>	<p>References the Future High Streets Fund, Towns Fund, The Getting Building Fund, and Welcome Back Fund and Assets of Community Scheme (allied with the new £150M Community Ownership Fund.)</p> <p>Encourages councils to Use Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO) to acquire vacant and derelict buildings in order to attract new investment. Government to 'strengthen the capacity and support for councils (no details provided as to how) to use new CPO powers</p> <p>Temporary pavement licence measures to be extended for a further 12 months and Government looks to make permanent.</p> <p>Review of Commercial leasehold legislation to be launched in the Autumn.</p> <p>Government to work with the sector to consider how Business Improvement Districts could be used to further improve the local trading environment.</p>	<p>In the RSN's Rural Lens Review of these place-based funds, click here to view and work carried out on behalf of the RSN by Pragmatix Advisory called Towards the UK Shared Prosperity Fund we highlight the unfairness to rural areas of the methodologies used to allocate these funds.</p> <p>We also refer to the capacity constraints on rural areas in participating fully in competitions for such Funds</p> <p>In many rural Towns pavement and road widths and other infrastructure issues makes pavement trading more difficult.</p>
<p>Creating Safer and Cleaner Spaces</p>	<p>Encourages use of the Levelling Up Fund and UK Community Renewal Fund to bid for funds for green infrastructure and improvements to public space and cycle lanes.</p> <p>Will explore how the Planning Reforms can ensure green infrastructure is better incorporated into new developments where high streets are being repurposed for homes.</p>	<p>See funding comments above.</p>

Celebrating Pride in Local Communities

A National Framework for Green Infrastructure Standards will be launched in 2022 and a revised Manual for Streets published in early 2022.

Government will shortly launch a technical consultation on proposed changes to parking charges.

Annual Parking Reports to be prepared by Councils publishing data on parking demand and income 'so citizens can engage more closely in the development of parking policies.

The Environment Bill will put existing guidance on using enforcement powers for littering and graffiti offences on a firm statutory footing and help ensure that authorised officers take a consistent and proportionate approach to enforcement. The Bill will also allow us to increase the level of fixed penalty notices for fly-tipping and ensure that agencies and authorities can work more effectively to combat waste crime.

Will review planning practice guidance in relation to litter, to provide further advice on how planning conditions can reasonably be applied to prevent and clean up litter caused by the fast-food outlets which are most likely to generate it.

Defra, in partnership with Keep Britain Tidy and chewing gum producers, have established a voluntary producer responsibility scheme through which gum producers will take greater responsibility for the litter and staining caused by their products. Gum producers will invest up to £10m in the scheme over the next 5 years, which will include financial support for councils this summer to help them remove gum litter and staining as they prepare to welcome back people to their high streets. The scheme also aims to significantly reduce littering of gum by facilitating long term, demonstrable behaviour change that we want to see on our high streets.

Will publish guidance on tackling graffiti for councils and business owners.

A new duty without any financial support. In rural areas there are many rural towns in any District or County/Unitary Council area each of which will need a separate report as needs and demands will be different in each.

States 'Community Payback can clean up our streets whilst cutting crime using some of the five million community payback hours delivered every year for offenders to give back to the communities that they live in. This can be through litter-picking, clearing fly-tipping, and removing graffiti. Probation will be moving to a new delivery model this summer which 'is an opportunity for us to focus on visible community payback that makes a genuine difference to local people'.

Government wants to encourage communities to celebrate and feel pride in their local high street, for instance by bringing back events that may have been lost over the years and restoring beautiful old buildings that have fallen into disrepair.

References the Cultural Investment Fund as helping to ensure access to local museums and libraries.

Also references Partnership Schemes in Conservation Areas

As the only reference to rural in the whole document it states

"We want to support high streets to attract visitors, who make a significant contribution to local economies - from large city centres to market towns and rural and coastal villages. The government has recently published the Tourism Recovery Plan which sets out a number of measures intended to support the return of domestic and, in due course, international tourism".

References Her Majesty The Queen's Platinum Jubilee in 2022, stating

"As well as the traditional street parties loved by communities, many other local organisations and individuals will be free to plan events and celebrations to take place in a range of civic venues and locations. Local authorities are invited to plan and encourage diverse and exciting community events that will engage local communities and boost local high streets".

HOSPITALITY STRATEGY

Detailed below is wording taken directly from the Executive Summary section of the government's [Hospitality Strategy](#). The RSN has provided comments alongside specific elements of the government's proposals. Note, the words "our" and "we" throughout this section refer to the government not the RSN.

"The UK hospitality sector is comprised of approximately 143,000 businesses, employs around 1.8 million people and, in 2019, generated £40.4 billion in Gross Value Added. As well as providing jobs and contributing to the economy, hospitality plays a vital role at the heart of communities up and down the country, giving a welcoming space for people to come together."

Building business resilience

"This includes measures set out in the High Streets Strategy to help build business resilience. To do this, we will:

7. *Improve the long-term relationship between hospitality tenants and landlords.*
8. *Work with Local Authorities and the hospitality sector to develop a model for hospitality-led regeneration hubs, with demonstrators delivered in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales."*

RSN COMMENT: There are resource and capacity issues here for rural local authorities.

Jobs and skills

"We want to strengthen the hospitality workforce by equipping employees to succeed in a modernised sector, attracting and retaining the right people and providing clear and rewarding career pathways."

To do this, we will:

10. *Explore options for vocational training offers that support career paths in the sector.*
11. *Work with the sector to raise the profile of skills and careers in hospitality.*
12. *Encourage hospitality businesses to participate in Government programmes, including the Help to Grow scheme, to improve digital and management skills in the workforce."*

RSN COMMENT: In the RSN's [Rural Lens Review of the Plan for Jobs](#) and [Skills for Job White Paper Rural Lens Review](#) the RSN has raised concerns about ensuring local access to such training and support initiatives. Most Hospitality businesses in rural areas are SMEs or run by the self – employed and engaging them in schemes such as these can be more difficult. Until Gigabit capable technology is accessible across rural areas, improved digital skills etc. will miss out rural businesses.

Next steps

“To oversee delivery of the 22 commitments outlined in this strategy across our reopening, recovery and resilience themes, we will establish a Hospitality Sector Council, comprising businesses, sector representatives and industry leaders. This Council will meet to agree an action plan to deliver the commitments, review progress against this plan and monitor the overall recovery of the sector as businesses transition from reopening through recovery to resilience.”

RSN COMMENT: Will this action plan be rural proofed?

RSN POLICY ASKS

Detailed below are some of the policy asks from our [Revitalising Rural – Realising the Vision](#) campaign, that we feel are relevant to the Build Back Better High Streets Plan and Hospitality Strategy:

RSN Revitalising Rural Policy Asks – Rural Town Centres and High Streets

Towns Fund and Future High Streets Fund: Government should support rural place-making by reviewing and expanding its Towns Fund and Future High Streets Fund, so additional places can benefit. The criteria for and flexibility of these Funds should be reviewed to make it easier for small rural town centres to succeed. The funds currently favour larger towns and largely overlook rural needs.

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.

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.

RSN Revitalising Rural Policy Asks – Economy

UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Levelling Up Fund

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 are likely to 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.

Programme design: a dedicated rural funding stream should retain the better features of the LEADER approach, which used a locally-led 'bottom-up' economic development approach to ensure that local priorities are addressed and suitable projects are brought forward. To ensure that varied priorities and needs across rural England can be met the funding stream should be flexible in its design. It should be capable of supporting start-up business and existing businesses with growth potential, and it should be open to social and community enterprise.

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.

RSN Revitalising Rural Policy Asks – Economy continued

Local Enterprise Partnerships and Local Industrial Strategies continued

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 includes welcome measures to help businesses survive and retain staff, though some of its measures could be more nuanced to better support rural business needs. Many small businesses lack the capacity to withstand a long period of financial hardship and many consumer-facing businesses are greatly impacted by social distancing limitations. Lockdown measures should be withdrawn gradually and taking account of different sectoral needs.

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.

RSN Revitalising Rural Policy Asks – Public Finances and 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.

RSN Revitalising Rural Policy Asks – Rural Transport and Access to Services

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. A comprehensive review is needed of the electric grid and, where appropriate, hydrogen supply, to address this 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.

RSN Revitalising Rural Policy Asks – Decarbonising Rural Communities and Economies

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 in rural areas unless bus service patronage grows. 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.

RSN Revitalising Rural Policy Asks – 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.

RSN Revitalising Rural Policy Asks – 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.

RSN Revitalising Rural Policy Asks – Rural Digital Connectivity

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.

RSN Revitalising Rural Policy Asks – Parish Councils and Rural Community Action

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.

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. Government should 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.

RSN Revitalising Rural Policy Asks – Sustaining Village Schools and Community Facilities

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.

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.

LIST OF RSN RURAL LENS REVIEWS

The Rural Services Network has undertaken numerous Rural Lens Reviews on documents issued by government in recent months. Click on the links or images below to access each review, which provide a deep dive into government proposals from a rural perspective.

[Tourism Recovery Plan](#) – July 2021

[Integration and Innovation Health White Paper](#) – June 2021

[Queen's Speech](#) - May 2021

[Build Back Better](#) – May 2021

[Bus Back Better](#) – March 2021

[Government Place Based Funds](#) – March 2021

[Sustainable Warmth](#) – March 2021

[Skills for Jobs](#) – February 2021

[Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution](#) – December 2020

[National Infrastructure Strategy](#) – December 2020

[Comprehensive Spending Review](#) – November 2020

[Plan for Jobs](#) – October 2020

