

RURAL LENS REVIEW



Tourism Recovery Plan

Published July 2021



At a glance



Rural Services Network's thoughts on a **Tourism Recovery Plan:**

- In practical terms the document is not really a Plan. It contains only very high-level intended outcomes or timeframes etc, and none that are rural specific. That said the Defra Rural Impacts Stakeholder Forum (of which the RSN is a member) has been told that an **Implementation Plan is being prepared with the emphasis on delivery and that there will be an Annual Report on delivery.**
- **We can see no evidence of rural proofing in this Tourism Recovery Plan**
- **Metrics based on Regions often mask specific issues (and opportunities) for Rural Areas. More nuanced policy is required.**
- **There are risks or potential unintended consequences of policies viewed from a single perspective** – for instance increasing the tourism season and/or getting longer visitor stays could result in more properties being used for holiday lets (including AirB&B type activities) and those homes being lost to help meet local housing needs.
- **The impact on services of greater tourist numbers and longer stays, and the cost-of-service provision, to Councils and other service providers must be fully taken into account in government funding decisions.**

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INTRODUCTION

The Tourism Recovery Plan published by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in June 2021 can be found [here](#).

In practical terms the document is not really a Plan. It contains only very high-level intended outcomes or timeframes etc, and none that are rural specific. That said the Defra Rural Impacts Stakeholder Forum (of which the RSN is a member) has been told that an Implementation Plan is being prepared with the emphasis on delivery and that there will be an Annual Report on delivery.

As is almost inevitable with government documents such as these, everything is about Tourism Recovery and there is no mention of the wider concerns of the RSN and most other rural stakeholders about the over-reliance of tourism (and other low pay, seasonal employment) in rural economies. **To be clear the RSN supports the development and growth of the tourism sector in rural areas but also wishes to see more diverse rural economies.** The Plan lacks any mention of the wider economic or social issues which are faced by people, businesses or communities in rural areas and which do themselves have an impact on Tourism – 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”](#).

Much of the content of the Tourism Recovery Plan document is a re-statement of pandemic support the government has made available. But little of any of that is area (rural or urban) specific and much of it is not sector specific. Where the RSN has issued a rural lens review of the policies etc. mentioned in The Tourism Recovery Plan we provide links in this document to those rural lens reviews.

The Tourism Recovery Plan replaces the Tourism Sector Deal and the International Business Events Actions Plan, both published in 2019, but builds upon their foundations.

SCENE SETTING

Local Government Finance

Local authorities play an important role in supporting tourism, yet local authority financial support to tourism activity, indeed 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.

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 – including tourism support.

Rural Proofing

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



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“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 Tourism Recovery Plan. 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 (as is the case with the Tourism Recovery Plan) rural proofed just because rural is mentioned- addressing the questions detailed above is paramount to rural proofing and we would hope that rural proofing will be evident in the Implementation Plan when it comes out.

The Tourism Recovery Plan is set out in four chapters, namely:

1. The Framework, *detailing high level aims and objectives*
2. A Swift Recovery, *covering the activity already underway to reopen safely*
3. Building Back Better, *providing a series of themes in tabular format*
4. Next Steps

Our deep dive focuses on the Building Back Better and Next Steps chapters which are split under the following headings:

1. Growth in every nation and region
2. Innovation and resilience
3. Skills
4. Sustainability
5. Inclusivity
6. Supporting business events
7. Next Steps

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 including, what the RSN will look out for as more detail emerges. The Key Statements in the tables are the Government's words.

In some instances, under each heading, the RSN raises issues not to object to the policy proposal but to raise the possibility of unintended consequences across other areas of public policy in the rural context.

The RSN's Rural Lens Reviews of:

- (a) [Build Back Better](#);
- (b) [National Infrastructure Strategy](#) and
- (c) [Spending Review 2020](#) are also relevant across many of the issues raised.

Key Statement from the Government's Tourism Recovery Plan		RSN Initial Comments
<p>1. GROWTH IN EVERY NATION AND REGION</p>	<p>The UK government has made a firm commitment to levelling up the country. The tourism sector has an important part to play in this, given the distribution of tourism jobs and the relative importance of the visitor economy to many parts of the country. DCMS will work with other to emphasise the role of tourism in this government agenda.</p> <p>The aim is for visitor spending to grow year on year in every nation and region of the UK, not only within but beyond the usual tourist 'hotspots' to smaller, lesser- known destinations. The government wants to see visitors staying longer (measured by average length of stay) and growing accommodation occupancy rates in the off-season. To achieve this, the UK will need an offer that continually meets consumer demands and delivers an excellent tourist experience, with the right structures in place to deliver tourism policy and a transport network that improves connectivity across the country.</p> <p>Investing in Local Visitor Economies</p> <p>In recent years, the government has announced a range of funds that provide direct place-based investment to local visitor economies. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The £3.6 billion Towns Fund The £1 billion Future High Streets Fund The £900 million Getting Building Fund The £220 million UK Community Renewal Fund, for which a prospectus was launched earlier this year. The £4.8 billion Levelling Up Fund, which will invest in infrastructure that improves everydaylife across the UK up until 2024-25. 	<p>SEE THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS</p> <p><u>RSN Rural Lens Review of Place Based Funds</u> <u>Pragmatix Advisory Report for the RSN – Towards the UK Shared Prosperity Fund</u></p> <p>Metrics based on Regions often mask specific issues (and opportunities) for Rural Areas. More nuanced policy is required.</p> <p>There are risks or potential unintended consequences of policies viewed from a single perspective – for instance increasing the tourism season and/or getting longer visitor stays could result in more properties being used for holiday lets (including Airbnb type activities) and those homes being lost to help meet local housing needs.</p> <p>In addition, the impact on services of greater tourist numbers and longer stays, and the cost of service provision, to Councils and other service providers must be fully taken into account in government funding decisions.</p> <p>For greater insight on this, see the documents and links referred to above.</p>

<p>Structure</p>	<p>The UK government also has a long track record of UK wide investment in tourism through the City Region and Growth Deals, in tourism infrastructure projects.</p> <p>Separately, the five rounds of the Coastal Communities Fund have delivered £229 million in 396 projects UK-wide.</p> <p>Since 2016, the £45 million Discover England Fund has supported the development of innovative and world-class English tourism products, itineraries and experiences, encouraging people to explore the regions and helping to extend the traditional tourism season.</p> <p>The government consistently invests in the UK’s cultural attractions, which are the top reason tourists choose to come here, and museums are the top cultural product associated with the UK.</p> <p>Recognising the importance of having a solid foundation for the sector, in March 2021 the government launched an independent review of the structure, funding and performance of Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) in England. The de Bois Review is undertaking a comprehensive programme of consultation and engagement, and will report to the Secretary of State for the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in summer 2021.</p>	<p>The RSN will consider the report and recommendations of the de Bois review from a rural perspective when published.</p>
<p>Transport</p>	<p>The government recognises the importance of investing in the country’s transportation network to underpin the success of the UK tourism industry.</p> <p>£500 million has already been pledged to kickstart the reversal of the Beeching era cuts in order to bring back historic rail lines and improve connectivity across the country.</p> <p>The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail has set out how the government intends to transform railways across Great Britain, making it simpler, easier and more attractive to travel by train. This includes new, easy ways to pay for journeys, an ambitious plan for improving accessibility and making trains more comfortable. It will enable the railways to better support tourism and regeneration in coastal communities and scenic</p>	<p>SEE THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS IN ADDITION TO THE RURAL TRANSPORT AND ACCESS TO SERVICES CHAPTER OF REVITALISING RURAL:</p> <p>RSN Rural Lens Review of Bus Back Better – The National Bus Strategy.</p> <p>RSN response to the Future of Transport Rural Bus Strategy Call for Evidence.</p> <p>Many rural areas are transport deserts with infrequent bus, rail or public transport services.</p>

2. INNOVATION AND RESILIENCE

landscapes as well as towns and cities.

'Bus Back Better', The National Bus Strategy sets out the vision and opportunity to deliver better bus services for passengers across England, through ambitious and far-reaching reform of how services are planned and delivered.

Coaches are an important part of the UK tourism industry, and play a vital role each year in connecting domestic and inbound visitors with destinations and venues across the country. Coaches play a distinctive role for many incoming tourists, providing bespoke routes and trips to destinations which are often not served by other means of transport. Coaches can play an active role in the UK government's 'Levelling up agenda', by providing relatively low-cost transport and a means of inclusive access to destinations for those unable to access other modes of transport. The government will also seek to work with tourism bodies and organisations to explore opportunities to promote the use of coaches, and facilitate and improve coach access to tourist destinations. Parking and accessibility for coaches at destinations will be an important part of encouraging people to use them and the government will explore with stakeholders how these issues might be given consideration.

Remaining globally competitive requires an innovative tourism industry making full use of **digital technology** and data to enhance the visitor experience.

More widely, government investment in digital connectivity has harnessed the power of new technologies, such as full fibre and 5G, to drive innovation in the visitor economy.

The potential gains from collating and maximising existing data could be substantial. COVID-19 exposed gaps in the tourism data sets held by the UK government; for example, whilst data has been used to produce broad estimates of tourism volume and overall spend, it has been less easy to translate that into estimates of profitability in the sector and business resilience.

Given the importance of data, the government will continue to actively

See:

[RSN Rural Lens Review of Bus Back Better – The National Bus Strategy.](#)

This raises the issue of digital connectivity in rural areas. SEE MORE DETAILS IN THE [RURAL DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY](#) CHAPTER IN REVITALISING RURAL

Based on the level of funding allocated in the Spending Review it is estimated that it will not be until circa 2028/29 that many rural areas will be able to access gigabit capable broadband – years behind urban areas.

The Government's position has moved from full fibre to every home by 2025 to "government is working with the industry to target a minimum of 85% gigabit capable coverage by 2025". Inevitably rural areas will form the bulk of the missing 15%. The 85% includes commercially viable areas.

3. SKILLS

explore, with VisitBritain, the benefits of developing a Tourism Data Hub. A Hub could address long-standing issues with access to robust, accessible and timely data in the tourism sector. Public/private sector engagement to collate, combine, analyse and disseminate the vast amount of data on consumer behaviour currently held by businesses in the industry could form the basis of a Tourism Data Hub.

The government will also launch a consultation on the introduction of a Tourist Accommodation Registration Scheme in England. A Registration Scheme is one potential route through which to create a data-driven approach, creating an improved national picture of the precise shape of the accommodation landscape which could feed into a wider Data Hub. Any such scheme could encompass the breadth of the sector, from 'traditional' accommodation such as hotels and B&Bs to short term lets in the sharing economy and could be used to underpin future government interventions, for example regarding the regulation of the sharing economy

To deliver the UK government's Tourism Recovery Plan, the UK will need a committed, talented and diverse workforce that sees tourism and hospitality as sectors that offer good, well paid, year-round jobs, as well as careers.

The industry remains committed to an employer-led, coordinated and proactive approach towards recruitment, retention and upskilling of the workforce, and ensuring there is a pathway to a rewarding career for the millions of people already working in the sector or looking to join the industry.

Coordinated by UK Hospitality and the British Beer and Pub Association (both of whom sit on the Tourism Industry Council), with the support of People 1st and Springboard, and working with a wide range of other organisations and employers, there are currently four industry led strategic priorities. These are i) great jobs and careers, ii) tackling long term unemployment, iii) vocational training and professional standards and iv) diversity and inclusion.

The 'Outside- In' approach must be applied

DCMS says that the allocation of just £1.2bn is to 'reflect the capacity of the industry'. The RSN is working with other rural interest groups to get the original £5bn budget allocation and timescale into the Spending Review 2021

A clear unambiguous statement from government and the industry is urgently needed.

Issues about affordability of connection and the hard/software and skills training and support are also key elements of future provision in rural areas.

SEE THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS IN ADDITION TO THE [FURTHER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND SKILLS](#) CHAPTER OF REVITALISING RURAL

[RSN RURAL LENS REVIEW OF THE PLAN FOR JOBS](#)

[RSN RURAL LENS REVIEW OF THE 'SKILLS FOR JOBS' WHITE PAPER](#)

Key to the success of achieving a diverse workforce will be access to skills training in rural areas.

Led by employers at a senior level via the Hospitality and Tourism Skills Board set up following the Tourism Sector Deal, the industry will develop programmes with ambitious targets to deliver on these priorities, including in areas such as apprenticeship starts, retention metrics, training goals and mentoring initiatives. The government will work closely with the Hospitality and Tourism Skills Board as this work progresses.

There is already a significant amount of activity being undertaken by the government on skills which benefits the tourism industry. For example:

In December 2019, the government announced the National Skills Fund, a £2.5 billion investment in helping adults to gain the skills they need to improve their job prospects and support the economy.

The government has announced schemes to support growth in apprenticeships and traineeships.

The Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education, a government arms-length body, equips people from all backgrounds for skilled occupations.

The Great Britain-wide Kickstart Scheme provides funding to employers in order to create hundreds of thousands of new job opportunities for 16- to 24-year-olds on Universal Credit.

In June 2020, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport supported the creation of the Digital Boost platform, providing free advice and support for small businesses across all sectors to build their digital capability to effectively respond to the challenges created by COVID-19.

Throughout the pandemic, VisitEngland has run webinars in conjunction with Google Digital Garage to provide tourism businesses with practical tips as they begin to recover. These webinars continue to run.

At the 2021 Budget, the government announced two new schemes – Help to Grow: Management, and Help to Grow: Digital. The government will offer a new UK-wide management programme to upskill 30,000 small and

The paucity of larger employers in rural economies can limit the variety of apprenticeships that are on offer, both in terms of their sector and skill level.

4. SUSTAINABILITY

medium size enterprises in the UK over three years.

The UK government recognises that labour mobility is an important issue for many sectors, including the tourism sector.

The government will continue to invest in the nation's natural assets and historic environment, which serve as a major driver for tourists, both domestic and international

Recognising the importance of sustainable tourism, the government commissioned the recent Landscapes Review, led by Julian Glover. The Review recommended that National Parks and Areas of Outstanding National Beauty (AONB) should become leaders in sustainable tourism, by working together with Destination Management Organisations, local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships, and local businesses. Since the review was published, the nation's Protected Landscapes have seen a significant increase in overall visitor numbers, as the public sought to enjoy the natural environment during these challenging times. **The government is working with partner organisations to consider all aspects of the review carefully, including how to support the recovery plans, and hopes to consult on this later this year.**

At Spending Review 2020, the government announced an investment of £950 million to provide a network of electric vehicle charging hubs at every service station on England's motorways and major A-roads.

The government will develop a Sustainable Tourism Plan, and put the UK at the forefront of the global discussion on sustainable travel.

5. INCLUSIVITY

The Tourism Sector Deal set out an ambition for the UK to become the most accessible tourism destination in Europe by 2025.

However, the government believes that more needs to be done to understand the barriers holding back participation in tourism. Without a detailed understanding of the baseline position, it is not possible to establish the most appropriate government interventions

The Minister for Tourism will hold a series of roundtables with stakeholders from across the tourism industry to better understand the barriers holding

The RSN will consider the Government's proposals when the Consultation is issued.

SEE THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENT IN ADDITION TO THE [DECARBONISING RURAL COMMUNITIES AND ECONOMIES](#) CHAPTER OF REVITALISING RURAL [RSN RURAL LENS REVIEW OF THE 10 POINT PLAN FOR A GREEN INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION](#)

Decarbonising transport in rural areas may prove the most challenging aspect of all on this agenda. Due to lack of infrastructure and long journey times to access services.

6. SUPPORTING BUSINESS EVENTS

back participation in tourism. These roundtables will be themed around issues such as guest accommodation, transportation, attractions, working with customers and skills. The aim is to establish a clear baseline of where the UK is in terms of inclusive tourism, and to come up with a series of concrete actions that the government can pursue to make a meaningful difference, above and beyond existing activity.

Later this year, the government's intention is to recruit a new disability and access ambassador for tourism.

The government wants to improve the attractiveness of the UK's already strong offer and become the World's Meeting Place, continuing to host set piece global events such as the annual World Travel Market which will next take place in London in November 2021.

This year, VisitBritain has established from within their budget allocation a UK-wide domestic fund for business events. This new fund will provide financial support to kick start the return of business events attended by largely domestic audiences. The value of the fund is £100,000 in the financial year 2021-22 and it will be open for applications until 30 November 2021.

The government is continuing to invest in events infrastructure. For example, earlier this year, the government ran the latest Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport UK-wide competition to improve broadband connectivity in event venues.

The UK government will also enhance its Ministerial advocacy programme. The government has created a cross-Whitehall group of senior officials in key government departments with an interest in growth and business events. This group will be tasked with developing a target list of international business events for the government to focus on bringing to – and retaining in – the UK, and developing a plan to host them here.

COVID-19 may alter the way in which business events are conducted. As such the government will work with the industry to:

Produce a strategy for sustainable business events, including a blueprint for how to hold more sustainable low carbon international business events.

<p>7. NEXT STEPS</p>	<p>The government will revisit the Tourism Recovery Plan at regular intervals to ensure the right policy interventions are in place.</p> <p>Parliament will have a role to play in helping to deliver the plan, and the government will provide the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee with an annual update on the progress of the plan and the tourism industry more generally as it recovers, with the first update in 2022.</p> <p>Finally, a plan of this scale needs clear internal oversight. A new inter-Ministerial group for Tourism, chaired by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and supported by the Minister for Tourism, will be set up to deliver this plan and agree the government's future interventions against it.</p>	<p>The RSN will consider the Annual Updates from a rural perspective.</p>
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Finally, detailed below are policy asks from our [Revitalising Rural – Realising the Vision](#) campaign, that we feel are relevant to the Tourism Recovery Plan:

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.

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.

UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Levelling Up Fund

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 pilots for the fund, due to run in 2021/22, include some rural areas. This will enable rural lessons to be learnt in time to inform the full roll out of the 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.

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.