

DRAFT RESPONSE SERVICE

As part of the Rural Opportunities Bulletin, RSN will regularly provide concise potential responses to key current consultations. These are not intended to be definitive or to reflect the views of RSN and may include potentially opposing responses to reflect different views designed to assist individual organisations in compiling their own response. We do however recognise the pressure members are under and we hope this service will assist.

The future for food, farming and the environment – Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs consultation

Defra is inviting views on the government's proposals for future agricultural policy. The following documents are available online:

- Consultation paper – “Health and Harmony: the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit”
- Annex A: Stakeholder proposals
- Annex B: Current Countryside Stewardship Options - Mid Tier, Higher Tier and Capital Items
- The Future Farming and Evidence Compendium

This consultation closes on 8 May 2018.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/the-future-for-food-farming-and-the-environment>

A suggested potential response to the ‘rural communities’ elements of the consultation is set out below.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is inviting views and comments on the government's proposals for future agricultural policy. Entitled “Health and Harmony: the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit,” the consultation paper outlines government proposals to replace the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and, as such, is of critical importance to rural areas.

Whilst the paper includes a great deal of information in relation to proposals for farming and the environment, it is much lighter on the wider issues affecting rural communities and economies.

Given the impact of Brexit on the farming sector, and the critical role of agriculture in relation to the wider rural economy and rural communities, this focus on farming and the environment is understandable. However, government must come up with a clear strategy for rural areas in their entirety. Agriculture and the environment are of critical importance, but there are many, many more needs and opportunities which need to be addressed and built upon.

Section 8 of the consultation document is entitled “Supporting rural communities and remote farming.” Despite the title, this section contains no detailed analysis of the issues facing rural communities or the potential impact of withdrawing from the European Union. As such, the document completely fails to propose any measures which might take advantage of this “once-in-a-generation opportunity.”

There is an urgent need for government to set out how it will approach and support rural economies and rural communities in the future. Whilst the consultation document begins to address such issues in relation to food and the environment, this represents a small subset of the entirety of the rural economy and the issues facing rural communities. Any suggestion that such wider issues will be addressed via ‘mainstreaming’ through other strategic documents, such as the Industrial Strategy,

fail to recognise the bespoke attention required to meet the needs and build on the opportunities available in rural areas.

Section 8 poses the following questions:

How should farming, land management and rural communities continue to be supported to deliver environmental, social and cultural benefits in the uplands?

There are a number of challenges facing rural communities and businesses. Please rank your top three options by order of importance:

- a) Broadband coverage
- b) Mobile phone coverage
- c) Access to finance
- d) Affordable housing
- e) Availability of suitable business accommodation
- f) Access to skilled labour
- g) Transport connectivity
- h) Other, please specify

With reference to the way you have ranked your answer to the previous question, what should government do to address the challenges faced by rural communities and businesses post-EU Exit?

Each of the 'challenges' identified in this question is highly complex and yet there is a dearth of supporting text providing any sort of relevant information. In addition, there is no explanation as to why these issues have been selected rather than other critical issues facing rural communities and businesses. As such, it will be very difficult to treat the responses received to this question in any sort of robust manner.

There must be proper consideration of all the critical issues facing rural communities and rural businesses. Government should produce a comprehensive, cross government and cross organisation strategy for rural areas. This is the only way to ensure rural businesses and rural communities are given due consideration and to make sure that wider strategic policy, such as that set out in the Industrial Strategy and ensuing Local Industrial Strategies, properly reflect the issues and identify specific measures to build on the wide rural opportunities which exist. Such a Rural Strategy is urgently required and warrants a separate consultation exercise.

The document contains the following two specific paragraphs in relation to rural businesses:

It is important for rural communities to be sustainable and multi-generational, providing employment opportunities for the young and not forcing people out due to a lack of suitable housing. We want to raise the productivity of rural businesses to improve growth and prosperity across rural communities. We will work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on the design of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, as part of delivering the government's Industrial Strategy, to support rural businesses.

We recognise that businesses and communities in rural areas face particular challenges, including physical and digital connectivity. Alongside the significant public investment being made, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is working to make improvements to digital connectivity, including in rural areas. Improved connectivity also increases innovation and productivity across the economy, bringing significant economic rewards. In agriculture, improved connectivity can support precision farming, including environmental sensing systems.

The importance of the new UK Shared Prosperity Fund is rightly recognised. In a rural context, the success of this Fund will depend on the extent to which it reaches beyond cities and large towns. Experience suggests that without specific reference to rural areas or bespoke rurally targeted funds,

this reach will not be achieved. There is no evidence to suggest that mainstreaming of funds to focus on fewer, bigger and, so-called, more 'efficient' delivery has any sort of sustained or consistently positive impact on rural economies and rural communities.

A Rural Strategy, representing an accurate reflection of rural needs and opportunities, would be an excellent starting point to ensure that the UK Shared Prosperity Fund does truly reach into all rural areas, both remote and less remote.

Similarly, the importance of broadband and mobile communications is rightly recognised as a critical issue. There is widespread market failure in relation to rural service provision as evidenced by poor broadband and mobile connectivity through private sector providers. These providers and government departments could be properly held to account if a comprehensive, England-wide, Rural Strategy was in place. We commend such an approach to government in parallel to the promised Agriculture Bill.