

The Rt Hon Andy Burnham MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
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22 September 2026

OPEN LETTER: Good growth in every postcode must include rural England

Dear Prime Minister,

We are writing following the Rural Services Network's National Rural Conference, reflecting the experiences and priorities shared by our members across rural England.

Over four days, rural leaders, local authority representatives, policymakers, service providers and practitioners came together to discuss the challenges and opportunities facing rural communities, and what those communities need to thrive.

Your Government has set itself the ambition of delivering "good growth in every postcode". We welcome that commitment. For the 9.7 million people living in rural England, it raises an important question: what will good growth mean in their communities, and how will they know it has reached them?

The experience of Greater Manchester has demonstrated the value of understanding place and giving local leaders the ability to respond to local circumstances. That same principle must apply across every part of the country, including rural communities within and outside mayoral strategic authorities.

Rural England has enormous potential. It is home to innovative businesses, skilled people, natural resources and communities capable of contributing even more to national prosperity. Research commissioned by the Rural Coalition found that, with the right conditions for growth, rural economies could generate up to £19 billion in additional annual tax revenues.

But growth does not happen in isolation. Businesses need people with the right skills. People need homes they can afford. Communities need access to health and care. Workers and young people need transport and digital connectivity. Councils need the resources to provide the services and infrastructure on which thriving places depend.

Drawing on the conference discussions and the experiences shared by our members, we are asking your Government to act on six priorities:

1. Unlock rural growth

Recognise rural economies as an integral part of the national growth agenda and invest in the skills, infrastructure and services that enable rural businesses to recruit, innovate and grow.

2. Make fair funding truly fair

Recognise the additional costs of delivering services across large geographical areas to dispersed populations. Rural residents currently pay, on average, 17% more per head in council tax than their urban counterparts while receiving less government-funded spending power. Fair funding is not special treatment; it is funding that reflects what comparable services genuinely cost to deliver.

3. Recognise the rural cost of living

Longer journeys, limited public transport, off-grid heating, housing pressures and distance from essential services can all increase household costs. Policies intended to improve living standards must recognise these realities and use evidence capable of identifying rural hardship that national averages can hide.

4. Deliver the right homes in the right places

Only 9% of homes in rural areas are classified as affordable, compared with 19% in urban areas. Rural communities need genuinely affordable homes of the right size and tenure, connected to employment, infrastructure and services.

5. Connect rural communities to opportunity

Connectivity is not simply the availability of broadband or the number of buses operating. It is whether somebody can get to work, attend college, see a doctor, run a business or access an essential service. Digital and physical connectivity must be considered together and measured by the opportunities people can actually reach.

6. Make national ambition work in every place

Housing, transport, health, digital connectivity, net zero and economic growth will not look the same in every community. Rural needs must be considered when policies are designed, not added as an afterthought. That requires meaningful rural proofing across government, a strong rural voice within devolution and local growth plans, and measures that make rural need and rural success visible.

With the Autumn Budget, the fiscal devolution roadmap and the forthcoming Rewiring the State White Paper, decisions being taken now will shape how growth, investment and public services are delivered across England for years to come.

We ask you to ensure that:

- the Autumn Budget, fiscal devolution roadmap and Rewiring the State White Paper explicitly address the conditions needed for rural growth;
- rural proofing is embedded across all government departments and led from the centre of government, rather than treated solely as a matter for Defra;
- national ambitions are supported by rural measures and transparent reporting; and
- rural communities, both within and outside mayoral strategic authorities, have a meaningful voice in the decisions affecting them.

Rural communities are not asking for national ambition to be lowered. They are asking for it to be designed so that it can succeed in every kind of place.

The Rural Services Network and our members stand ready to work constructively with your Government. We would welcome the opportunity for further discussion with ministers and officials about how these priorities can help make good growth in every postcode a reality for rural England.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr Roger Phillips OBE
Chair, Rural Services Network

Kerry Booth
Chief Executive, Rural Services Network