RURAL SERVICES NETWORK

Delivering for All

A ROADMAP FOR RURAL PROSPERITY

Every person, in every place, deserves the chance to thrive, including everyone in our rural communities.

Purpose of the Roadmap

Delivering for All is a roadmap dedicated to ensuring that every resident in England—regardless of where they live—has access to good quality services, a sustainable environment, and equitable opportunities. The positive impact of these policies will be felt not only within rural, coastal, and small-town communities, but by the nation as a whole.

This document outlines key principles for rural policy development, which are essential to ensuring that these communities can prosper. It identifies priority areas for action that align with the Government's Plan for Change missions—including promoting economic growth, reducing inequalities, improving public services, and fostering environmental sustainability.

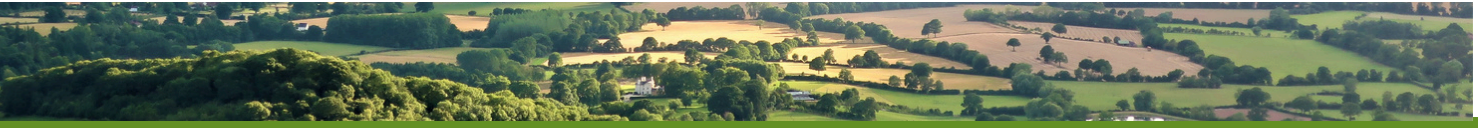
Delivering for All is the roadmap to unlocking rural prosperity and harnessing the potential of every community to build a stronger, fairer, and more sustainable future.

Our villages, market towns, coastal communities, and rural areas are vibrant hubs of enterprise, innovation, and leadership that can drive national renewal.

By investing in these communities, we strengthen local economies and secure a future where every resident can contribute and thrive. Let's move beyond old divides and harness the energy of every corner of our country—villages, market towns and rural communities alike.

Cllr Roger Phillips, Chair of The Rural Services Network

This roadmap highlights eight key areas vital to driving real change in rural policy and delivery.



Getting the Foundations Right

To deliver change, and strengthen our country, we must ensure that change reaches every community, including those in rural areas.

At the Rural Services Network, we believe that there are three essential elements which are required to achieve meaningful change and ensure that policy for rural communities across England, can be successful and achieve its aims.

1 Rural Fair Funding

Rural Public Services must be fairly funded taking into account the additional cost of service delivery to sparsely populated areas.

2 Rural Metrics and Measures

We must use the right metrics and insight to understand the policy challenges in rural areas and be able to assess if policy interventions are working

3 Rural Focused Policy

Policy must be designed to meet rural needs, not a one size fits all approach, but targeted at overcoming barriers that prevent rural from thriving.

RURAL FAIR FUNDING

Every Council should have the resources it requires to meet the needs of its residents.

Rural Councils have historically been underfunded by successive governments.
This has led to rural councils increasing council tax to balance the books which disadvantages rural residents when wages earned in the rural economy are lower.

Councils are disadvantaged as they face additional costs of delivering services to sparsely populated areas.

It is crucial to address funding disparities that limit rural service provision, and infrastructure development, and therefore limit the potential of our rural communities.

RURAL METRICS AND MEASURES

Our villages, towns, coastal and rural communities are diverse. The data that tries to capture these communities at a national, regional or even local authority level often misses the detail and the reality of rural life.

There is a risk that metrics used by the Government, are designed to measure urban circumstances and therefore are skewed against the rural reality.

For example, unemployment levels are relatively low in rural areas, however that ignores low wage levels or the seasonal nature of tourism employment.

Government has set itself missions to improve our country, but can only truly succeed if we increase prosperity across the whole country.

RURAL FOCUSED POLICY

Policy designed by Government, can often focus on a one size fits all approach, without recognising the distinct challenges that those living in a rural area can face.

We believe that policy should be designed to meet the needs of those in our market towns and villages, in the same way that it meets the needs of those in our cities.

This may mean a different approach to supporting rural affordable housing, or ensuring that residents can access services in areas with poor transport connectivity.

This roadmap sets out the importance of each of these three elements to achieve successful policy development and delivery in the 8 key areas.

Rural
Fair Funding

Rural Public Sector Fair Funding

Successive governments have underfunded rural councils, leaving rural residents at a disadvantage. Urban residents receive in 25-26, 40% more in Government Funded Spending Power per head compared to rural residents. Rural voters also pay, on average, 20% more per head in Council Tax because their local council gets less government grant.

Adding to the challenge, council services cost more to deliver in rural areas, where residents are spread across wide areas but still depend on vital services. Communities in these areas deserve their fair share of funding to ensure they remain functional and sustainable—especially in the face of the cost of living crisis, which hits them hardest

32% Government funded spending power in Urban Councils is 32**% MORE** per head than in predominantly Rural Councils in 2026/27.

17% Rural residents continue to pay 17**% MORE** in Council Tax compared to their urban counterparts in 2026/27.

Key Asks

1. Fair Funding

Create Public funding formulae which ensure the unique service needs, delivery constraints and the whole range of extra costs of delivering services in rural areas (and not just travel costs) are properly reflected.

Ensure funding for the Social Care Reform proposals uses a formula which recognises the whole range of costs faced by rural councils and care providers. This includes financially addressing the current backlog in assessments etc.

2. Metrics and Measures

The Government should monitor the impact of funding formulae on all areas across the country, including those in rural and urban areas to ensure that residents in our market towns and villages are not paying more for their services compared to those in more urban areas.

3. Rural Policy

Protect rural council taxpayers by fairly funding public services to ensure they are not asked to pay more to fund local services than their urban counterparts.

Public sector bodies should have the resources they require to meet the needs of their community and deliver services effectively. Residents should not be disadvantaged due to living in a more rural community.

Every Council should have the resources it requires to meet the different needs of their community. This includes Councils serving our market towns and villages as well as those in our cities.

Rural Economies

Rural areas hold immense untapped economic potential—a sleeping giant worth £19 billion, as identified by the Rural Coalition. Yet, this potential is often overlooked due to metrics and policies designed for urban contexts.

Rural enterprises, from small businesses and sole traders to larger ground breaking engineering and aerospace businesses, drive innovation, create jobs, and foster vibrant communities.

Unlocking this potential requires tailored support, infrastructure investment, and policies that reflect the realities of rural economies, ensuring they contribute fully to the nation's prosperity.

£19B

With the right investment, rural areas could add **£19 Billion annually** to the national economy.

Wages earned in the rural economy are **lower** than the national average.

Key Asks

1. Fair Funding

Ensure that rural areas receive their fair share of support to grow the economy and create a system where decision making and resources are devolved to local areas as far as possible, creating the flexibility for tailored solutions to prioritise and meet local needs and opportunities.

2. Metrics and Measures

Protect rural communities by ensuring that the metrics used to devise strategies or programmes for growth (including skills) are not based on 'one-size-fits-all' thinking but reflect the disadvantage in rural economies within regions.

3. Rural Policy

Deliver a support programme for SMEs and community entrepreneurs in rural areas, especially start-ups and those seeking to grow.

Ensure policy and strategy is Rural Proofed in a way that is meaningful and demonstrable and also includes outcome monitoring. There is now a real case for placing Rural Proofing on a stronger legal footing, in the way that it has been in Northern Ireland.

Provide opportunities for the growth of the green economy and supporting infrastructure, namely the national grid and digital and mobile connectivity.

Everyone deserves the right to contribute to a thriving economy which is critical for national growth. SMEs, community enterprises, and green industries must be supported to unlock rural potential and drive innovation and employment.

Rural Transport

Rural transport systems are vital for ensuring that all residents have access to essential services, employment, and community interaction, yet they often lack the necessary investment and infrastructure.

The absence of adequate transport options in rural areas can lead to social isolation, limit job opportunities, and increase dependence on private vehicles, which can lead to high transport costs.

Enhancing rural transport is essential for economic development, social equity, and environmental sustainability.

3.6 X

Urban authorities budgeted to spend over **3.6 times more** per head on subsidised bus routes than rural authorities in 2024/25. .

56%

56% of small rural towns have become transport deserts or are at risk of becoming one across northeast and southwest England .

Key Asks

1. Fair Funding

Ensure that rural transport receives it's fair share of funding to enable rural residents to access employment, services and access to health and care services, including funding for councils to provide socially necessary rural buses.

Ensure local authorities are fairly funded to maintain vital rural road infrastructure.

Protect Community transport by creating a larger funding pot which is sustained over a longer period. It should promote the use of community transport schemes which serve outlying settlements and feed into bus or rail routes.

2. Metrics and Measures

Ensure that rural communities are not disadvantaged by measures which only focus on passenger levels, and don't recognise the inherent social value of transport options to enable providers to have the evidence to make the case for investment into rural transport.

3. Rural Policy

Recognise the key role that transport plays in enabling a community to access employment, training and services and ensure that the Integrated National Transport Strategy sets out an effective approach for rural mobility and transport solutions.

Create a greener future by undertaking a comprehensive review of the electric grid and, where appropriate, hydrogen supply, to address the risk that the high costs of introducing electric or hydrogen buses and their fuelling facilities could prove problematic in rural areas.

Everyone deserves access to a transport system that meets their needs and enables them to access employment, training, public services, and social interaction.

Rural Access to Health and Care Services

Access to Rural Health and Care Services

Access to high-quality health and care services is a cornerstone of thriving communities, yet rural areas often face challenges such as workforce shortages, longer travel times, and higher service delivery costs.

Residents in rural communities deserve equitable access to healthcare, tailored to their unique needs and circumstances. Investing in rural health and care is essential for reducing disparities, supporting wellbeing, and ensuring sustainable, inclusive communities.

1 in 4

Rural areas will see fastest growth in 65+ population over next 20 years. Currently on average, **1 in 4** people are aged over 65 in rural areas.

29%

29% of rural residents couldn't get NHS dental appointments in 2023/24.

Key Asks

1. Fair Funding

Ensure strategy is Rural Proofed, especially proposals designed to tackle the core drivers of disparities in health outcomes including quality of housing, and access to good quality jobs and training.

This must also take into account the whole range of extra costs of delivering services in rural areas and ensure that they are accurately reflected in funding formulae.

2. Metrics and Measures

Address the lack of understanding of the distinctive health and care needs of rural areas by ensuring measures are collected at the right level to deliver services that are suited to the specific needs of rural places. Develop integrated services that provide holistic person-centred care.

3. Rural Policy

Deliver a rural work force strategy to aid training and recruitment across all health and care services including dentistry.

Protect rural communities by ensuring that they have access to mental health services that meet their needs.
Create a culture which ensures the Third Sector is included as a partner in the integrated planning system and resourced accordingly, where it is cost effective to do so and in the community's interests.

The contribution of community and voluntary organisations must not be underestimated, not least with respect to prevention and wellbeing.

Everyone deserves the right to access quality health and care services. Rural residents can face unique challenges—from workforce shortages to geographic isolation—that demand tailored policies to ensure their wellbeing.

Rural Affordable Housing

Rural Affordable Housing

Rural affordable housing is critical for enabling vibrant, sustainable communities where people can live, work, and thrive. Yet, many rural and outlying areas face a shortage of affordable and quality homes, which limits opportunities for young people, essential workers, and families to stay and contribute to their communities.

Ensuring access to affordable rural housing is vital for community resilience, economic stability, and social wellbeing.

8.8x

Rural residents need **8.8** times their annual salary to buy a home, compared to **7.6** times in urban areas (2024).

20%

Between 2020 and 2023, waiting lists in rural areas increased by **20%**, compared to 14% in urban areas.

Key Asks

1. Fair Funding

Introduce and fund an ambitious annual target for genuinely affordable quality rural homes and deliver this through a dedicated rural affordable housing funding programme to reflect local needs and policies.

2. Metrics and Measures

Ensure that the definition of 'affordable housing' is sensitive to local market conditions and wages and takes into account local circumstances.

3. Rural Policy

Deliver a rural housing strategy stating how new housing will be delivered to meet rural communities needs.

Protect rural tenants by ensuring that local authorities can register and manage the short and long term rental market to meet local need, thus avoiding oversupply of holiday lets. In addition, Government should ensure that policies on Energy Performance Certificates do not result in a reduction of long term rental properties.

Ensure that a national homelessness strategy includes investing in solutions in rural areas, taking into account the distinct challenges of rural communities.

Address the lack of affordable homes in the countryside by Rural Proofing any planning policy changes which may be introduced. This will ensure that all planning policies have an aim of increasing the proportion of affordable quality homes built and that no policies have an unintended consequence negatively impacting on opportunities for affordable housing in rural areas.

Develop a policy to exclude rural areas from any proposals to extend the Right to Buy to Housing Association properties. Create a programme of at least 5 years of support for a national network of Rural Housing Enablers covering each rural housing authority.

Everyone deserves access to a warm, safe, affordable home. Rural areas face a critical shortage of genuinely affordable homes and targeted solutions are vital to ensure the sustainability of rural communities.

Rural Planning

Planning plays a vital role in creating sustainable, thriving communities. By ensuring that new homes are supported by essential infrastructure—such as transport, digital connectivity, healthcare, and education—planning can unlock opportunities for growth and wellbeing. Locally informed policies and community engagement are key to shaping development that meets the diverse needs of rural areas, while preserving the unique character and natural environment of the countryside.

With the right approach, planning can enable vibrant rural communities where residents have access to good jobs, services, and quality homes—places where everyone has the opportunity to prosper.

x2

Rural areas have **twice** the proportion of second homes compared to urban areas.

Protecting rural banks, post offices and libraries helps communities stay vibrant, sustainable and connected.

Key Asks

1. Fair Funding

Ensure that rural councils have the funding and resources to effectively manage their planning departments to ensure that they can deliver the support required to enable the increase in both planning responsibilities and applications to meet the new homes target of the Government.

2. Metrics and Measures

Housing need and deprivation can be hidden when statistics are collected at a large geographical area therefore measures should be collected at the most appropriate geographical level.

3. Rural Policy

Deliver an effective approach to Neighbourhood Plans into which rural communities have spent a huge amount of time and effort so that they can influence the future of their local area.

Protect rural voices in community engagement around planning. Whilst digital might always be the preferred choice, poor connectivity in rural areas means many voices are being lost.

Develop Rural Proofed planning policy which gives autonomy to Local Authorities and the communities they serve and ensure that the needs of rural communities are not overlooked in future changes to national planning policy guidance.

Create thriving rural areas by building the right homes, in the right places offering a range of tenures for all stages of life from the working young to retirees.

Everyone deserves to live in a community that has effective infrastructure and appropriate access to services. Effective planning ensures rural communities can shape their future to avoid inappropriate development, and missed opportunities for sustainable growth.

Rural Digital Connectivity

Rural Digital Connectivity

Rural connectivity is the backbone of modern life, underpinning access to education, healthcare, employment, and community engagement. Yet, many rural areas still face unreliable internet and patchy mobile coverage, leaving residents digitally excluded and businesses at a disadvantage.

Investing in robust, future-ready connectivity is essential for unlocking economic potential, improving quality of life, and ensuring no community is left behind in the digital age.

70% Only 70**%** of rural premises have access to gigabit-capable broadband, compared to 92**%** in urban areas (2026).

10% 10% of rural areas still lack access to superfast broadband, compared to just 1% of urban areas.

Key Asks

1. Fair Funding

Deliver improved rural connectivity through the effective delivery of Project Gigabit; and creating a clear road map and government funding for connecting very hard to reach premises as soon as possible.

Protect rural residents from digital exclusion by delivering the Shared Rural Network; ensuring 5G regional innovation funding is focussed on rural areas and use cases.

2. Metrics and Measures

Digital Connectivity related measures and targets should disaggregate data by rural and urban levels to ensure an accurate representation of coverage disparities.

3. Rural Policy

Ensure high quality coverage and delivery of TV and radio, supporting the viewing requirements of rural consumers.

Ensure that the Digital Inclusion Action Plan includes specific actions for rural areas to ensure that it can create a digitally savvy innovative rural workforce and community, by providing accessible training, appropriately funded.

Everyone deserves access to Digital and Mobile connectivity. This may mean targeted solutions to ensure that rural communities are not left behind and to ensure access to education, business, healthcare, and social interaction.

Rural Net Zero

Our rural and outlying areas have a critical role to play in the UK's journey to Net Zero, with natural resources, space for renewable energy infrastructure, and opportunities for innovation.

However, they face unique challenges, including limited access to grid capacity and funding support.

Accelerating the transition to Net Zero in rural areas is essential for environmental sustainability, economic resilience, and national energy security.

2.6x

The rural fuel poverty gap in villages and hamlets is **2.6** times higher than in urban areas (2022).

25%

In rural areas, **25%** of homes are off the gas grid, this equates to **1.4 Million** properties (2025).

Key Asks

1. Fair Funding

Ensure that all economic growth programmes include explicit objectives to support low carbon and Net Zero growth.

Specialist advice and related grant funding should be made available for existing rural businesses to help them reduce their carbon footprint and the UK meet its 2050 targets.

2. Metrics and Measures

Recognise the unique challenges and opportunities that exist in rural areas by collecting measures and targets at a granular level to ensure that rural communities can support the journey to net zero.

3. Rural Policy

Deliver a 'fabric first' Energy Strategy which address rural needs. This means, ensuring rural is ready to embrace the move to a technology neutral approach to Net Zero so that individuals can choose the most appropriate solutions to heat their homes.

Address the gaps in the network of public charging points across rural Britain. As many rural areas are tourist hotspots, increasing this network will boost the economy in rural areas.

Create a Net Zero Rural Britain by working with the energy industry to ensure that the electricity distribution network is resilient, reliable and fit-for-purpose across all rural Britain before additional demands are put upon it.

Everyone deserves to be part of the decarbonisation journey, those in rural areas need tailored support to ensure they can play their part, as Rural Britain has immense potential to lead the transition to Net Zero.

RURAL SERVICES NETWORK

The Rural Services Network is the national champion for rural services, working to ensure that rural, coastal, and small-town communities thrive.

We advocate for fair funding, inclusive policies, and a prosperous future for all.

Find out more on our website or email **admin@sparse.gov.uk**

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www.rsnonline.org.uk