

Rural Coalition Media Release

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Countryside groups unite to issue the Rural Challenge

With the autumn statement due to announce a ‘roads revolution’ and a focus on fracking, the priorities of rural communities risk being sidelined, says Lord Robin Teverson, Chair of the Rural Coalition [1].

Calling for recognition of the national importance of the countryside and our rural communities, the Rural Coalition is today (3 December) urging Government to address three core areas to support them: the rural economy, affordable housing, and health and social care services. The Rural Challenge 2015 outlines a new set of rural priorities for the next Government.

Lord Teverson adds:

“In the build-up to the 2015 general election, we want to make the case for a healthy and flourishing countryside. Despite the enormous environmental, social and economic contribution that rural areas make to this country, they are in danger of being overlooked on key issues like housing, health and economic growth. That is why we are following up our 2010 report with a new Rural Challenge that asks the next government to do more to address rural concerns.”

“With demands for essential services increasing, as well as calls for more housing, it is vital that the needs of rural populations are considered alongside those in urban areas. Last year, 486,000 rural businesses had a combined turnover of £369 billion. It is time that the contribution of rural areas is formally recognised by integrating rural considerations more effectively in national policy.”

Acknowledging the difficulties facing rural populations in maintaining essential services, the Rural Challenge 2015 shows how, despite contributing 31% of Gross Value Added, rural areas are often overlooked in national policy. The Rural Coalition believes it is crucial that central Government retains the capacity to properly assess the impact of all policies on rural communities.

Despite recent moves by government to devolve decision-making powers away from Westminster, such as the creation of Local Enterprise Partnerships, rural economies remain vulnerable and are often overlooked in national and regional policies. The Rural Coalition is calling for a greater acknowledgement of the role of rural areas, and a commitment to supporting rural business by rolling out high speed broadband and encouraging small enterprises.

At the same time, those on lower incomes are being squeezed out of the rural housing market, leading to a talent drain from rural areas and difficulties for local businesses and services. To help counteract this trend, the Rural Coalition

advocates a number of measures, including targets for affordable housing in small communities and more flexible public investment. [2]

Against a backdrop of the increasing cost of public service delivery and growing numbers of elderly residents, the Rural Coalition is also calling for greater coordination of health provisions and improved systems of funding to ensure better access for those in isolated communities.

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Notes to Editors

[1] The following organisations are members of the Rural Coalition: [ACRE](#) (Action with Communities in Rural England), People and Places, Arthur Rank Centre, Campaign to Protect Rural England, Country Land and Business Association, National Association of Local Councils, National Farmers Union, National Housing Federation, Plunkett Foundation, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, Royal Town Planning Institute, Rural Services Network, and Town and Country Planning Association.

[2] The Rural Challenge 2015 calls on the next Government to:

Growing and sustaining the rural economy

- ‘Rural-proof’ Local Enterprise Partnerships and devolution within England to realise the potential of all rural areas, including the vital role of market towns.
- Speed up the rollout of rural broadband infrastructure and 4G mobile technology to ensure a universal service obligation of at least 10 megabits per second by the end of 2015, and relate payments to infrastructure providers to their rural performance.
- Strengthen cross-boundary strategic planning, and give further continued support for and simplify the delivery of neighbourhood plans in rural and coastal communities, linking these with wider community-wide investment and delivery development plans.
- Encourage the development of local food supply chains, through a new national Food Strategy and action plan, stronger national planning guidance to protect high street and town centre food retail, and local investment in manufacturing, marketing and distribution.
- Support micro and small enterprises by developing the Rural Growth Networks to stimulate the rural economy, including community-owned enterprises to safeguard services and deliver renewable energy schemes.

Providing affordable housing for local people

- Introduce new national targets, properly monitored, for affordable housing delivery in settlements of under 3000 people.
- Develop models for small-scale older people’s housing in rural areas, including local plan policies, financing, tenure mix, and provision of care services and community support.
- More flexible public investment in affordable housing, allowing higher grant rates for smaller affordable housing where viability is shown to be the cause of under-supply.
- Strengthen the role of neighbourhood plans within the planning system where advanced community-led proposals conflict with developer-led proposals that fail to meet local needs.
- Require ‘change of use’ permission for new second homes in rural and coastal areas where there is a shortage of local housing and a high density of second homes.
- Retain the ability to require a proportion of affordable homes on small developments (under 10 homes) to meet local needs in rural communities.

Working for healthy rural communities

- Recognise the vital role played by local social care and community support in preventative action on health in rural areas.

- Scale-up and roll out existing models of successful community action, such as good neighbour schemes and ‘village agents’.
- Strengthen the role of rural community facilities as outreach centres for health and social care, investing in initiatives that deliver health and social care services through telemedicine and video links.
- Overhaul the formula for NHS funding of commissioning groups to include a sparsity factor, and revise the public health funding allocations given to higher tier local authorities to better reflect local needs and take account of the rural premium.
- Drop plans to remove the Minimum Practice Income Guarantee for GP surgeries, or amend the scheme, for example by providing targeted funding, so that smaller rural surgeries can remain viable.

Members of the Rural Coalition share a vision for rural areas as a living, working countryside which balances the competing demands for growth, sustainability and protecting landscapes. The Rural Coalition is committed to following up the messages of The Rural Challenge 2015 by communicating with Parliamentarians in the run-up to the General Election and engaging with the newly elected Government.

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