

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01AM 6 JULY 2017**

## **NEW GOVERNMENT MUST END SIDELINING OF RURAL ISSUES**

*Coalition highlights that 'rural England is not just about farming and the environment' and calls for Brexit to be 'rural-proofed'*

**6<sup>th</sup> July 2017, 00.01am:** Rural areas risk becoming 'enclaves of the affluent' unless the Government acts on pressing issues including the lack of affordable housing and the impact of austerity on local services, according to a coalition of 12 leading national organisations.

The Rural Coalition is urging ministers to 'up their rural proofing game' on Brexit and other key public policy areas to deliver a fairer deal for the over nine million people in danger of being 'left behind' in rural areas. The Coalition is today issuing a statement, identifying the key principles, policies and actions which the new Government must apply to secure a 'living, working countryside' and give rural communities a sustainable future.

These include a planning system and funding regime that delivers a meaningful increase in the number of affordable homes outside of towns and cities, fair distribution of funding between urban and rural areas for all services including healthcare and transport, and an industrial strategy that realises the potential of rural areas.

After a general election campaign in which rural issues were virtually sidelined by both major parties, the Coalition calls on ministers to recognise that rural businesses are diverse and rural communities share the same varied needs as those in cities.

With the Brexit negotiations underway, the statement highlights that EU trade, regulations, funding programmes and migrant labour have all helped to shape rural areas and calls for Whitehall to rural proof Brexit and post-Brexit policy decisions, to ensure that they meet rural needs. For example, key grant funds for rural businesses and projects – the LEADER and EAFRD programmes<sup>1</sup> – will cease after exiting the EU, with potentially severe consequences for the rural economy.

Seventeen per cent of England's population live in rural areas, supporting some 520,000 businesses, employing nearly 3.7m people and generating £404bn every year for the national economy. Yet the Rural Coalition warns that many rural dwellers feel 'left behind' or ignored, with key services cut back because of public sector austerity and private sector cost-cutting and efficiency savings, including, most notably, adult social care and buses. Rural local authorities receive much less funding (per resident) than other local authorities, and residents face starker challenges in accessing services including physical and mental healthcare and education.

Members of the Coalition also want to see business support and infrastructure reach rural areas, so the rural economy can grow, and say any Industrial Strategy must put in place support to release the potential of rural areas and to address market failures.

The Rural Coalition now calls on the incoming Government to take four positive actions:

- Introduce an ambitious annual target for the number of new affordable homes built in rural areas and a dedicated rural affordable housing funding programme.
- Deliver a support programme for rural businesses and community entrepreneurs.
- Ensure that the extra costs of delivering services in rural areas are properly reflected in any funding formula, such as those used for local government, education and the NHS.

- Provide a comprehensive community infrastructure support programme, which recognises the pressures on volunteers, helps those places with less capacity and spreads existing good rural practice.

The statement calls for decision-making, funding and delivery to be devolved to local level and involve consultation with rural communities where possible, so it can better respond to local needs and circumstances. It urges more of a focus on delivering a fairer deal for rural communities across policy and funding decisions, and for rural communities to receive an equitable share of service provision, rather than services being concentrated in larger settlements as 'an easy option'.

**Margaret Clark CBE, Chair of the Rural Coalition**, said: *'The Government must recognise that rural England is not just about farming and the environment, and address the very real challenges facing those who live and work in our smaller towns and villages. For too long, rural people and businesses have been left behind and sidelined in the national political debate. It is time for Government departments to up their rural proofing game to achieve a Brexit deal and domestic policy agenda that works for rural communities. From now on, all policies and their implementation must be properly assessed to ensure they meet the needs of the millions of people who call the countryside home. Rural communities deserve to have a sustainable future and the time to act is now.'*

**The Rt Revd Dr Alan Smith, Bishop of St Albans, President of the Rural Coalition**, said: *'England's glorious countryside brings great joy to many people, both those living in it and those beyond. It would be a great shame, however, if only the affluent are able to live in rural areas in the future because of a lack of long-term thinking on housing and other key services. No population in this country should feel left behind, and it is time for policymakers to work together to create a living, working countryside and give rural communities a sustainable future.'*

**Richard Quallington, Executive Director of ACRE**, said *'Whilst there are many examples of the positive action taken by government to support rural England in recent years, further work is needed to ensure that all rural communities flourish and thrive. ACRE is particularly concerned that rural communities are being weakened by a lack of affordable housing, a consequence of high house prices and limited supply of homes built by housing associations and local authorities. We call upon government to introduce an ambitious target for the number of new affordable homes to be built in rural areas including a support programme to ensure that rural communities locally are in the lead in shaping such rural developments.'*

*The chocolate box image associated with rural areas too often belies the real challenges facing many rural residents. A beautiful countryside sometimes hides the ugly truth of poverty, poor health and social isolation. ACRE also calls upon the government to ensure that the extra costs of delivering services in rural areas are properly reflected in any funding formula and that the key role of community groups, charities and enterprising residents is celebrated and supported through the establishment of a new community infrastructure support programme across rural England.'*

**Richard Blyth, Head of Policy of the Royal Town Planning Institute**, said: *'The role of planning is equally vital in small towns and villages as it is in urban areas. It is therefore essential that the planning of our urban areas and rural areas is undertaken in a joined up way with the distinct needs and contributions of both evaluated in a holistic way.'*

**Jerry Marshall, CEO of Germinate: the Arthur Rank Centre**, said: *'Rural churches remain at the heart of community life and with others provide help for the isolated and lonely, support for families and even enterprise and broadband provision. But this must supplement and not substitute for essential government service provision and community support.'*

**Cllr Sue Baxter, chairman of National Association of Local Councils**, said: *'Brexit and other new Government policies must provide opportunities to build affordable housing, infrastructure and*

*economic development to the right level for rural areas to prosper and be sustainable. We want local (parish and town) councils to be a crucial part of rural governance, decision-making and delivery of public services. After all, local councils are the backbone of our democracy and at the heart of many communities in England. They provide our neighbourhoods, villages, and towns with a democratic voice and a structure for taking action - real people power at grassroots level.'*

**James Alcock, General Manager of Plunkett Foundation**, said: *'Throughout the UK, rural communities have been taking action themselves to set up and run essential services and assets of community value. They do this because they know no one else is going to do it for them, and without it, their communities would be much poorer in comparison. From the village shop, pub and post office, through to woodlands, farms and fishing ports, Plunkett Foundation has supported over 500 such community owned businesses to establish and thrive, but we are seeing their journey to open taking longer, and the barriers put in front of them making it harder for them to survive. We are calling on the Government to recognise their vital contribution to the economy, the environment and the health and well-being of rural livelihoods and to support a comprehensive community infrastructure support programme and a support programme to directly help rural businesses and community entrepreneurs. Such initiatives would inspire more rural communities to take action and provide essential services in areas of market failure.*

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To read the statement, please see [www.ruralcoalition.org.uk](http://www.ruralcoalition.org.uk)

For more information, images or interview requests please contact:

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## Notes to editors

### The Rural Coalition

- The Rural Coalition offers itself as a partner for all Government departments and their agencies, drawing on a wealth of expertise and access to rural practitioners.
- Members of the Rural Coalition include:
  - Action with Communities in Rural England
  - National Housing Federation
  - Campaign to Protect Rural England
  - Plunkett Foundation
  - Country Land and Business Association
  - Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors
  - Germinate: the Arthur Rank Centre
  - Royal Town Planning Institute
  - National Association of Local Councils
  - Rural Services Network
  - National Farmers Union
  - Town and Country Planning Association
- The Rural Coalition's President is Rt Revd Dr Alan Smith, Bishop of St Albans

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<sup>i</sup> These programmes offer grants for projects which contribute towards economic development, diversification and productivity in rural areas. EAFRD is managed by Local Enterprise Partnerships and LEADER is managed by Local Action Groups.