

About the Rural Coalition

March 2025

The Rural Coalition is an alliance of twelve national organisations who subscribe to a vision for a living and working countryside in England. Given many shared values, we seek to be more influential by joining in common cause.

The Rural Coalition believes that no-one should be unfairly disadvantaged simply because of geography and that every rural resident should have fair access to jobs, to housing and to basic services, whilst every rural business should have the opportunity to grow and prosper. This includes being able to share in the opportunities that arise from the transition to net zero.

[Rural Coalition Website](#)

Members of the Rural Coalition

[Action with Communities in Rural England](#) (ACRE)

[Arthur Rank Centre](#)

[CPRE – The Countryside Charity](#)

[National Association of Local Councils](#)

[National Centre for Rural Health and Care](#)

[National Farmers Union](#)

[National Housing Federation](#)

[Plunkett UK](#)

[Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors](#)

[Royal Town Planning Institute](#)

[Rural Services Network](#)

[Town and Country Planning Association](#)

President of the Coalition

The role of President of the Rural Coalition was created in 2016, partly as a figurehead, but mainly as a nationally recognised and respected person who brings gravitas to the work of the Coalition. The President attends meetings as often as possible and is kept fully briefed.

The Coalition has sought a non-politically aligned member of the House of Lords as President to ensure independence. The President receives briefings from the Coalition in respect of upcoming debates in the House and is able to put down questions etc. The President is also able to notify the Coalition of any relevant issues being discussed or upcoming of which they become aware. The President is also able to host meetings and events in the House of Lords on behalf of the Coalition.

The Bishop of Newcastle, The Rt Rev'd Dr Helen-Ann Hartley

Bishop Dr Helen-Ann will be taking on the role of President of the Coalition in Spring 2025. Her predecessor (for eight years previous and the first President) was The Rt Rev'd the Lord Bishop of St Albans, Bishop Alan Smith). A short biography for Bishop Helen-Ann is below:

The Rt Rev'd Dr Helen-Ann Hartley has been Bishop of Newcastle since February 2023, with oversight of the Diocese of Newcastle that covers the area of Northumberland and the City of Newcastle, from the Tyne to the Tweed. Prior to taking up this role, she was Bishop of Ripon in the Diocese of Leeds, and before that, Bishop of Waikato in New Zealand's North Island. Helen-Ann was born in Edinburgh and spent her early years in the Scottish Border region before her family moved to Sunderland where she grew up. All three of her episcopal roles have covered areas of diverse rurality, from the heartlands of New Zealand's dairy farms to the uplands of Northumberland. Helen-Ann regularly attends the Oxford Farming Conference and appeared on a main stage panel discussion at the 2020 conference on food, faith, and farming. She took up her seat in the House of Lords in October 2024, as a Lords Spiritual. She has also served as a trustee of the Farming Community Network and is currently a Fellow of the Royal Agricultural Society of England. She is a keen runner, with parkrun and trail running particular highlights. Helen-Ann is a regular contributor to the *Pause for Thought* slot on BBC Radio 2's Zoe Ball Breakfast Show. She is married to Myles, an organist and musician.

The Chair of the Rural Coalition

After more than eight years at the helm the current Chair – Margaret Clark CBE – is stepping down and a replacement is now sought.

Location: The Chair will work from home, although travel will be necessary to attend certain meetings and other events. The Rural Coalition does not have an office and meetings are usually held in the premises of member bodies or other organisations as appropriate (Defra have provided space in the past). The Chair is therefore home based but attends meetings and events, often in London, on a regular basis.

Ways of working: The Rural Coalition's secretariat is provided by ACRE (in lieu of a membership fee), one of the member bodies. This includes organising and minuting Coalition meetings and some support with specific projects. ACRE is planning to update this arrangement later this year, which will include more strategic support for the Chair to help develop and drive activities. The current Chair has, from time-to-time, worked with a small number of Coalition Members representatives (mostly ACRE, RSN Plunkett, but also NHF and NALC) on specific pieces of work.

Time commitment: Four meetings of the Coalition per year in London – usually hybrid, with most members attending in person and a few attending on-line. The Chair attends in person. In addition, the Chair is also expected to have frequent meetings with the President, the Secretariat, Ministers and others to plan, co-ordinate and promote the Coalition's key priorities. The Chair attends monthly (plus occasional one-off) meetings (on-line) of Defra's Rural Insights Forum

Remuneration: The role of Chair is not accompanied by any financial remuneration, although expenses for travel may be claimed.

The last 18 months has seen an increase in the volume of activities undertaken by the Coalition, partly due to the run-up to the July 2024 General Election and the subsequent change in Government. As a guide as to the main work undertaken recently the current Chair has said:

- “There have been three or four big pieces of work which have taken up much of my time. The first was preparation for and, more recently, follow-up to the General Election. In mid-2023 we produced the Coalition's 'roadmap' - *A Better Future for Rural England: Opportunity for Change* - which was then used as the platform for letters to the 3 main Parties, the media (including letters to The Times), discussions with political parties, Lords, MPs. The second was the Pragmatix report into the economic case for rural interventions, which also involved negotiating additional funding with members, as well as the actual work on the report. Pragmatix has been the main driver of Rural Coalition's business this year.

- In between these two major pieces of work, there have also been discussions with members (mainly through papers written by me) about the future of the Coalition, priorities and funding. The latter also included trying to secure external funding, most notably from Esmee Fairburn, entailing some preparatory meetings, preparing a case and a meeting with them; ultimately, unsuccessful unfortunately. Whilst the two reports, hopefully will not need repeating for a while (though the roadmap may need refining and/or expanding) and should give the Coalition the basis for its work for a while, the funding question might need returning to in the future.
- I also, for interest, checked written material over the past 18 months or so to get a feel for how much was involved. In addition to a lot of material around the roadmap and Pragmatix report and papers on the future of the Coalition, priorities and funding, there were lots of letters to Ministers, mainly as a result of the churn in PMs, Defra Secretaries of State and Rural Affairs Ministers. I wrote to each of them on behalf of the Coalition at the appropriate time (and not the same letter each time!). I have also occasionally drafted responses to consultation documents. Paul Dixon (Secretariat) and I also liaise over the agendas and notes of Coalition meetings.
- I have also attended a number of events, including Ministerial receptions, launches and openings, meetings/conferences, both in London and elsewhere.”

It will be for the new Chair to decide how broadly they wish to work.