



The
Rural
Coalition

Rebuilding Rural: Growing Back Better

For a Living, Working Countryside

In 2017 the Rural Coalition set out its key principles, policies and actions to promote sustainable rural communities in England.

Building on that earlier work, this document presents priorities for delivering a successful recovery across rural England following the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions to contain the virus. It outlines our asks of Government, including measures we would wish to see reflected in the upcoming Comprehensive Spending Review.

As well as the urgent need to recover from the economic downturn and support communities, rural areas must

benefit from the important Government commitments to level-up so that nowhere is left behind and for the UK to become net zero for greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Added to which is the existing Government commitment, from 2019, to develop its vision for rural England.

Impacts of the pandemic and restrictions have brought into focus and exacerbated a number of rural vulnerabilities, whilst at the same time highlighting some notable strengths and opportunities. The national response needs to support rural areas to ensure not only that the recovery is equitable, but that it unlocks their potential to contribute fully to national growth and to grow back better.

Our strategic policy asks

The Government should set out its promised **vision for rural England**, building on the strengths of rural places, their economies and communities, whilst addressing long-standing vulnerabilities.

This will require policies to achieve:

- ✓ **Opportunity for all in England**
Levelling up access to good quality jobs, homes, education, training and services in rural areas, by removing barriers and putting in place proportionate and fairer funding.
- ✓ **A more resilient rural economy**
Tackling the structural weaknesses of some rural economies and their over-dependence on certain sectors, such as the visitor economy.
- ✓ **A major contribution to becoming net zero**
Capitalising on opportunities for green rural growth, whilst helping to deliver the nation's net zero emissions target.

To enable these aims to be achieved, the Government must:

- ✓ **Give places both power and responsibility**
Devolving decision-making and resources as far as possible, creating the flexibility for tailored sub-national and local policy delivery.
- ✓ **Strengthen the hand of rural civil society**
Stepping up support for rural communities, giving them access to the resources to take action locally.
- ✓ **Encourage urban-rural interdependence and understanding**
Helping reconnect cities, towns, villages and the countryside, emphasising their inter-relatedness, so the benefits that each offers the other are better understood.

The **Rural Coalition** is thirteen 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.

What have we learnt?

Rural Coalition members have collated and analysed a large amount of feedback from businesses, communities and service providers across rural England about the impacts of the pandemic and its associated restrictions. Drawing on this body of evidence, we have identified ten main lessons which should be acted upon to secure the wellbeing of rural England, whilst ensuring a just transition to a net zero future.

Our ten lessons:



Rural vision

The broad range of economic, social and environmental impacts arising from the pandemic and restrictions underline the need for a comprehensive and joined up policy approach.



Economic diversity

Although diversified from predominantly land-based economies, many rural areas have become over-dependent on other sectors, not least the visitor economy with its pattern of low paid, seasonal employment.



Levelling up

The future income of and opportunities for many residents are uncertain. Rural areas have significant employment in sectors which have faltered with the restrictions and high levels of employees placed on furlough. Access to services others take for granted is limited or difficult.



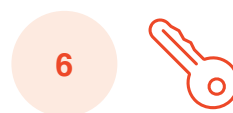
Health care provision

Rural areas experienced relatively fewer virus infection cases, but have increasingly elderly populations and limited capacity in their local NHS healthcare systems. Those could quickly be overwhelmed if infection were more widespread.



Civil society

There has been a renewed sense of place and the strength of rural communities has been confirmed, with most quickly creating support networks who know their vulnerable and isolated residents. These have attracted new, younger volunteers.



Local assets

The value of local shops, village halls and everyday services in rural settlements has been underlined. They have proved a lifeline for many, when travel and visits to larger service centres are restricted.



Connectivity

The need to resolve rural gaps in digital connectivity and the quality of provision has been starkly demonstrated. They posed a major constraint for home working, online schooling, virtual GP consultations and the like.



Travel and transport

The model for rural transport is unsustainable, with bus routes and community schemes at risk. Unaddressed, more residents face isolation and car dependency (and emissions) will grow.



Housing affordability

Some households losing jobs and income, coupled with enhanced demand for rural living, risks being a perfect storm that leaves more unable to afford local house purchase or rental prices.



Urban-rural dependencies

The importance of countryside and green space to people's wellbeing is clear. But latent tensions between urban and rural dwellers surfaced, as second homeowners arrived during the lockdown and visitors flocked to coast and country when restrictions were relaxed, putting local services under pressure.

These lessons present policy opportunities, as well as highlighting various rural vulnerabilities. This is covered over the following pages, together with some proposals for appropriate policy responses.

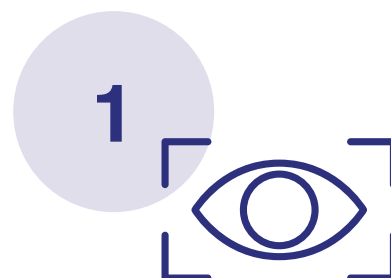
Lesson 1:

Rural vision

The broad range of economic, social and environmental impacts arising from the pandemic and restrictions underline the need for a comprehensive and joined up policy approach.

Opportunity

Recovery from the pandemic, as well as new arrangements that are required post-Brexit, present Government with a chance to set policies for the future direction of rural England.



Vulnerability

The number and complexity of policies, strategies and plans which impact upon rural areas is substantial, making their coordination complex.

To take advantage of this opportunity and to address this vulnerability, Government should:



Act quickly on its commitment and develop a **vision for rural England**, doing so in consultation with rural stakeholder organisations



Identify key **rural objectives** and targets relevant to each Whitehall Department's remit, which they will be primarily responsible for (albeit some objectives may be shared)



Define specific **measures and timescales** to achieve those targets, making local delivery the default option wherever possible



Ensure that the rural vision is fully reflected in **strategic plans** that are developed at a sub-national level to determine priorities and support local delivery

Lesson 2: Economic diversity

Although diversified from predominantly land-based economies, many rural areas have become over-dependent on other sectors, not least the visitor economy with its pattern of low paid, seasonal employment.

Opportunities

Rural areas can broaden their economic base and boost their resilience, by improving their connectivity, adding value and seeking growth opportunities, including through green growth.

Business support could focus on sectors which attract higher wages and career opportunities – not least for younger people – assisting start-ups, business expansion and inward investment.



Vulnerabilities

Rural economies struggle to withstand major shocks, such as Covid-19 and Foot and Mouth Disease, which disproportionately impact over-represented sectors.

Most jobs within rural tourism and hospitality are poorly paid and many are seasonal. More generally, there is a reliance on part-time working and low paid self-employment.

To take advantage of these opportunities and to address these vulnerabilities, Government should:



Repurpose **Local Industrial Strategies** so they focus on the economic recovery. It should mandate that they specifically address rural needs (except where only covering urban places)



Create a rural-specific funding stream within the **Shared Prosperity Fund**, which is sufficiently flexible to meet varying local needs, is locally managed and sizeable enough to have an impact across rural England



Employ Local Industrial Strategies and the Shared Prosperity Fund to drive **investment in the green economy** of local rural areas

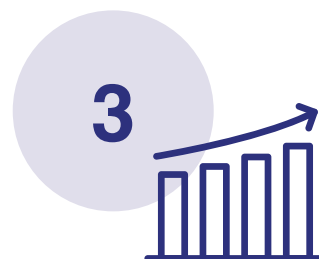
Lesson 3: Levelling up

The future income of and opportunities for many residents are uncertain. Rural areas have significant employment in sectors which have faltered with the restrictions and high levels of employees placed on furlough. Access to services others take for granted is limited or difficult.

Opportunities

There is significant scope to make training and retraining initiatives more accessible to the rural workforce and to those joining the workforce. This includes improving access to further education and training.

Rural areas gained valuable experience from the LEADER programme of using a locally-led economic development approach to target their specific needs.



Vulnerabilities

The skills that the rural workforce has may not be well suited to the needs of the economy as it recovers and adapts.

Rural areas typically lose many of their young people as they move away for higher education and then secure jobs in large urban centres.

The ability of predominantly rural local authorities to support levelling up action is tightly constrained by their historically low level of funding compared to urban authorities.

To take advantage of these opportunities and to address these vulnerabilities, Government should:



Use **local partnerships** (involving local authorities, LEPs, the private sector and not-for-profit sector) as the vehicle to design and deliver rural economic development programmes



Complete and implement the **Fair Funding Review** about the future allocation of revenue grant funding for principal local authorities, taking full account of extra rural service delivery costs



Ensure that **outreach and online options** are made available to rural residents when they apply to join training, retraining and apprenticeship initiatives



Ensure that **rural schools** are properly resourced and supported to develop the potential of rural young people



Launch a second wave of **Rural Growth Network** projects, building on the experience of those that were run from 2012 to 2015

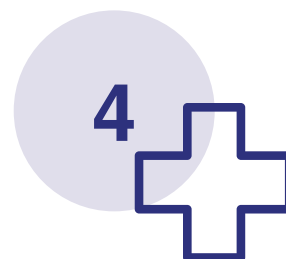
Lesson 4: Health care provision

Rural areas experienced relatively fewer virus infection cases, but have increasingly elderly populations and limited capacity in their local NHS healthcare systems. Those could quickly be overwhelmed if infection were more widespread.

Opportunities

Financial allocations for NHS Clinical Commissioning Group areas could better reflect the care demands that they face from an aging population.

The existing local public health function could be enhanced and better resourced, taking more account of rural needs and costs.



Vulnerabilities

Rural areas have a high proportion of residents in older age groups who are at high risk from a pandemic such as the Covid-19 virus.

Many general hospitals serving rural areas have limited intensive care capacity and relatively few specialist staff, having lost out from earlier NHS reforms.

Staff shortages in the health and care sectors, due to recruitment and retention issues, pose a significant constraint on services in many rural areas.

To take advantage of these opportunities and to address these vulnerabilities, Government should:



Review the **funding allocations** for local NHS, social services and public health services, to ensure they properly reflect rural demand and sparsity costs associated with rural delivery



Focus on measures to address **workforce recruitment and retention** concerns which have affected health and care services in rural areas



Use part of the Government's new **capital investment in hospitals** to boost capacity at smaller general hospitals



Encourage effective local approaches to **social care provision** based around better cooperation between the statutory, private and civil society sectors

There has been a renewed sense of place and the strength of rural communities has been confirmed, with most quickly creating support networks who know their vulnerable and isolated residents. These have attracted new, younger volunteers.

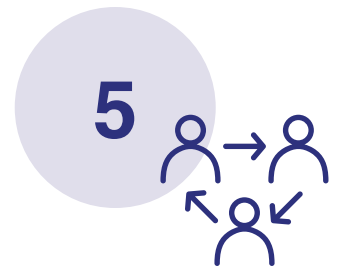
Opportunities

Relative to external initiatives, community-led action in rural areas is often quickly established, more tailored to local needs and more adaptable to changing circumstances.

There is a window in which to seek to retain new volunteers and new groups that have sprung up in response to the pandemic, so they continue contributing to community wellbeing.

Parish and town councils offer an existing level of governance at the community level in most rural areas, which with the right powers can help lead place-based policy approaches.

Church and faith based networks are active providing grassroots support within rural communities and can be especially important in deeply rural places.



Vulnerabilities

Many of those who are already active as volunteers were unable to join the response to the pandemic because of their age or underlying health conditions.

Some rural communities have less capacity to take local action than others and may lack sufficient people with leadership skills, experience or confidence.

Larger formal agencies tend to focus their efforts on easier-to-reach urban areas, leaving rural communities to fend for themselves.

To take advantage of these opportunities and to address these vulnerabilities, Government should:



Make funding available to organisations that deliver **advice, guidance and support** to the rural community and voluntary sector, whilst they help that sector to recover



Support **newly formed rural community** groups, to help them continue and evolve into befriending or good neighbour schemes



Develop initiatives to support the rural community and voluntary sector that play into its **local responsiveness**, a strength that is not well served by over-centralised initiatives



Support **volunteer-based training** opportunities, especially for young people and for those who have lost jobs, so they can acquire new skills

Lesson 6: Local assets

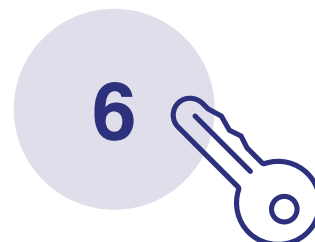
The value of local shops, village halls and everyday services in rural settlements has been underlined. They have proved a lifeline for many, when travel and visits to larger service centres were restricted.

Opportunities

Many rural residents have, as a result of the restrictions, become reacquainted with their local areas, including their shops and local food suppliers.

There is renewed interest in supporting local shops and businesses, not least to secure local jobs. More private assets, such as pub buildings, are likely to come up for sale, creating opportunities for them to be taken into community ownership.

The prevalence of village halls and other rural community buildings is an opportunity for hosting a range of local services, enterprises and activities.



Vulnerabilities

Many village shops and pubs are financially marginal businesses and are soon at risk if their costs rise or their customer demand falters.

The growth in online shopping and delivery during the lockdown may have permanently diverted some trade away from rural town high streets. Suppliers have sometimes focussed on larger outlets at the expense of village outlets.

Many village halls have limited reserves and without bookings for some months these may be depleted. Social distancing measures still constrain their ability to operate.

To take advantage of these opportunities and to address these vulnerabilities, Government should:



Assist rural communities that wish to take-on shops and pubs, by providing start-up and growth **capital grant funding**, as well as supporting organisations that offer start up help and specialist business advice



Create a **Rural Shared Outcomes Fund** that encourages service commissioning bodies to work together, sharing resources and costs, to improve service outcomes in rural areas



Extend the **Village Hall Improvement Grant Fund** to the end of this Parliament, building in more allowance to provide support to fund applicants

The need to resolve rural gaps in digital connectivity and the quality of provision has been starkly demonstrated. They posed a major constraint for home working, online schooling, virtual GP consultations and the like.

Opportunities

The Government's existing strategy for full fibre plans to subsidise its roll out in the most rural areas. The Shared Rural Network also seeks to plug gaps in the 4G mobile network.

Good digital connectivity, if widespread, has the potential to mitigate some long-standing access to service issues faced by rural communities, for example through telehealth.

Good digital connectivity, if widespread, will be an enabler for rural economic diversification and will drive productivity.



Vulnerabilities

Without public sector intervention upgrades to digital networks simply focus on commercially viable urban and suburban areas.

With accelerated take-up of online meetings, education, consultations, banking and so on, poor or unreliable connectivity becomes a significant issue.

To take advantage of these opportunities and to address these vulnerabilities, Government should:



Speed up delivery of its plans to bring **full fibre** to all parts of the country, with the necessary public investment quickly brought on stream to ensure an outside-in approach



Monitor closely the effectiveness of the **Shared Rural Network** initiative and expand its 5G pilot programme, with further pilots in rural areas (including for health and social care)



Ensure no-one is left out from digital opportunities through lack of **online skills**, by expanding and supporting digital champion initiatives under a Digital Inclusion Programme

Lesson 8: Travel and transport

The model for rural transport is unsustainable, with bus routes and community schemes at risk. Unaddressed, more residents face isolation and car dependency (and emissions) will grow.

Opportunities

There is an opportunity to rethink the funding model for rural bus provision and the support for community transport schemes, taking an area-based or local network approach.

The take-up of electric and ultra-low emission cars may grow fast in rural areas if there is an expanded infrastructure put in place.

There is scope to reduce travel needs for rural residents through policies which support local service provision and local employment.

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Vulnerabilities

The current model for subsidised rural bus routes relies on ever more tightly squeezed local authority budgets, where it is discretionary funding.

Social distancing measures mean that rural bus and community transport will need extra support for the next year or so just to survive.

The situation exposes the challenge for rural residents without a car or unable to drive, who are mainly the young, the elderly and those on low incomes.

The situation, at least for the next year or so, makes it harder to achieve a modal switch to greener forms of transport.

To take advantage of these opportunities and to address these vulnerabilities, Government should:



Ensure that its planned national Bus Strategy tackles rural needs, with a fair share of the additional **funding pledged for local buses** and trains going to modernise, integrate and improve rural transport (including investing in low emission buses)



Fund dedicated **cycling networks** in rural areas through the Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy, not least in and around rural towns



Support a sizeable expansion of public **charging points for electric vehicles** in rural areas, to eliminate concerns about their range between charges, whilst helping rural businesses and tourism

Lesson 9: Housing affordability

Some households losing jobs and income, coupled with enhanced demand for rural living, risks a perfect storm that leaves more unable to afford local house purchase or rental prices.

Opportunities

There is a considerable body of evidence about changing planning and funding in ways designed to boost the delivery of affordable housing in rural areas.

Ensuring that a broad mix of households can afford to live in rural areas should bring about a range of economic, social and environmental benefits.

There are registered housing providers that, if supported, are keen to focus on delivering affordable rural homes, an action which would itself contribute to economic recovery.



Vulnerabilities

There is a shortage of affordable housing to meet rural needs. Existing planning and funding policies have not been well designed for or met those needs, especially in smaller settlements.

Experiencing restrictions appears to be driving more households to migrate out of towns and cities, placing further pressure on rural housing markets.

If key workers of all types cannot afford to live and work in rural areas, there are knock-on consequences for social wellbeing and service provision.

To take advantage of these opportunities and to address these vulnerabilities, Government should:



Have Homes England create a dedicated **rural affordable housing programme**, with grant funding that recognises rural building costs and invests in energy efficiency



Offer additional **financial incentives** to landowners and private landlords that provide affordable housing, including for community-led schemes



Ensure its proposals to **reform the planning system** enable the right balance between landscape and environmental enhancement and supporting rural communities, by providing housing that meets the needs of settlements (and especially affordable housing to rent)



Ensure its policies for discounted **homes for key workers** are workable in rural areas, where development sites are mostly small (so exempting them would cut off supply) and where the term 'key workers' will need to be applied flexibly to match local needs



Ensure a reformed planning system maintains a strong role for **local decision-making** and for **community engagement**, not least keeping a meaningful role for neighbourhood planning

Lesson 10:

Urban-rural dependencies

The importance of countryside and green space to people's wellbeing is clear. But latent tensions between urban and rural dwellers have surfaced, as second homeowners arrived during the lockdown and visitors flocked to coast and country when restrictions were relaxed, putting local services under pressure.

Opportunities

There is an opportunity for farmers and rural businesses to capture more value from local food and products, including where selling them into urban markets.

There is already evidence of a growing interest in local products during the period of pandemic restrictions, with potential benefits throughout local supply chains.

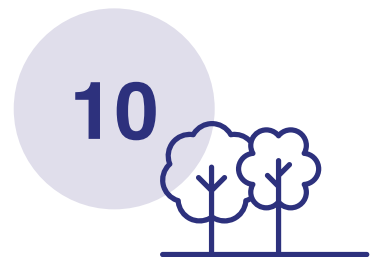
Vulnerabilities

Urban perceptions of rural areas often lack recognition of their wider value (beyond being somewhere to visit) e.g. food production, carbon sequestration and ecosystem services.

Rapid market changes during the pandemic caused significant problems for farmers with, for example, falling demand for milk, rising demand for some meat products and diversified businesses which could not operate.

Basic infrastructure is not in place in many rural areas to support large numbers of visitors e.g. car parking, public transport, public toilets.

An influx of visitors to the countryside and coastal venues created a fear factor among many.



To take advantage of these opportunities and to address these vulnerabilities, Government should:



Ensure that the **Agriculture and Environment Bills** lead to incentives for farmers to deliver ecosystem services which are effective and offer them sufficient reward



Help promote **British food products** with grant funding available for business and product development, farm and processing equipment, and support for online marketing



Support organisations that aim to encourage **engagement and better understanding** between urban and rural residents



Increase promotion of the **Countryside Code**, using social media to target groups that may not be familiar with it

The outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review 2020, to be announced by Government this Autumn, is a critical opportunity to get fully behind rural recovery and to shape that recovery so the outcomes are both fairer and greener than they would otherwise have been.

Rural areas are home to 9.3 million people or 17% of England's population. Any plan for national recovery must take them into account to ensure it meets its potential and to ensure no-one and no areas are left behind. Indeed, with some 545,000 registered businesses based in predominantly rural areas, the survival, growth and productivity of those enterprises will be a key contributor to the performance of the nation's economy.

The Rural Coalition believes that the measures outlined in this document, based on years of accumulated evidence and experience by rural stakeholder organisations, will make a significant and sustained positive difference if now acted upon.

We stand ready to discuss our proposals with Government and with others and to contribute to their successful delivery.



Members of the Rural Coalition



Rural Coalition President:

Rt Revd Dr Alan Smith, Bishop of St Albans

Rural Coalition Chair:

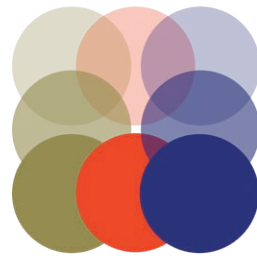
Margaret Clark CBE

Members of the Rural Coalition:

Action with Communities in Rural England
Arthur Rank Centre
Country Land and Business Association
CPRE – The Countryside Charity
National Association of Local Councils
National Centre for Rural Health and Care
National Farmers Union
National Housing Federation
Plunkett Foundation
Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors
Royal Town Planning Institute
Rural Services Network
Town and Country Planning Association



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