

No rural community left behind:

Our recommendations for the next
government

May 2024



Introduction

With the prospect of a general election on the horizon, we've worked with [ACRE members](#) to outline four priority areas of government policy to be developed so that opportunities for those who live and work in the countryside are improved – and no rural community is left behind.

'No rural community left behind' and the recommendations featured herein, are based on a [discussion paper](#) developed in consultation with network colleagues who told us about the issues facing rural communities in their area, and what could be done about them.

We look forward to hearing from policy makers who share our vision for building stronger, fairer, and more sustainable rural communities over the coming months and years.



The challenge

Diminishing public services, inadequate infrastructure, unaffordable housing, and ageing populations are all issues that characterise the experience of many rural communities. But they do not get the policy attention they warrant because of cultural perceptions of the countryside as a green and pleasant land, and the dominance of discourse concerned with agriculture and landscape protection.

The next government has a chance to take a more concerted and holistic approach to serving the needs of people living and working in the English countryside who make up 17% of the population. Indeed, we think it should give them as much consideration as the 17% who live in our capital city.

The ACRE Network believes a brighter future for the countryside is possible – one in which rural communities are empowered to become stronger, fairer, and more sustainable places where everyone can thrive. This requires policy makers to show consideration for delivering schemes outside of built-up areas, including much greater investment in rural services, infrastructure, and affordable housing where these are not adequately provided by the market. It is also about positioning communities themselves as agents of change – not least with respect to achieving Net Zero.

The ACRE Network believes a brighter future for the countryside is possible – one in which rural communities are empowered to become stronger, fairer, and more sustainable places where everyone can thrive.



Our ‘to-do list’ for the next government

1. Proactively ‘rural proof’ domestic policy

Because government policy is often developed with the whole country or specific segments of the population in mind, this can result in rural communities being forgotten. Of course, it can also be easier and cheaper to develop solutions that target larger urban concentrations of need.

Rural proofing can become more effective if it is enshrined in legislation with a requirement for it to be frontloaded at the beginning of the policy making process.

Recent governments have started to ‘[rural proof](#)’ policy, however in our experience this is usually an appraisal of decisions that are already in scope or have already been made, rather than designing interventions based on an understanding of how different responses may be needed in different geographical settings.

Rural proofing can become more effective if it is enshrined in legislation with a requirement for it to be frontloaded at the beginning of the policy making process.

Recommendations

- Create a statutory advisory body charged with making sure that people in the countryside benefit from a level of support and service provision equivalent to those in urban areas. It should be given teeth by creating a new legal requirement for all government departments concerned with domestic policy to proactively assess the impact of key decisions on rural communities.
- Require every major government executive agency or advisory board concerned with targeting need or disadvantage at a strategic level (e.g. The Social Mobility Commission, Equalities and Human Rights Commission, National Infrastructure Commission etc.) to have at least one person on its board with responsibility for rural proofing.
- Provide rural proofing training and support within the civil service to help policy makers’ better access the potential impact of interventions on rural communities.
- Refine official measures of multiple deprivation to highlight dispersed disadvantage hidden from view in rural areas.
- Set objectives and metrics for rural socio-economic development in devolution plans.



- Invest in action research that improves understanding between urban and rural communities by giving voice to a diverse range of lived experiences in the countryside and facilitating contact between policy makers and representatives of community organisations.
- Equip regulators of universal service industries with new powers requiring companies within their remit to use profits to cross-subsidise provision in less profitable parts of the countryside.
- Adequately protect households off the gas grid in the event of future energy price shocks. Support measures should guarantee that the cost of electricity is provided at the same price per Kwh as gas.

2. Invest in services, infrastructure, and affordable housing

Rural communities tend to be poorly served by the market due to lower population densities which make satisfying demand costly. As a result, many parts of rural England lack commercial services and infrastructure such as high-speed broadband. The problem has been compounded by a lack of investment in local public service provision leaving rural residents with no choice but to make costly journeys to access basic services.

Particularly pressing is the acute shortage of housing that is genuinely affordable to local people. According to government [statistics](#), the average lower quartile house price was 8.8 times the average lower quartile earnings in predominantly rural areas compared with 7.6 times in predominantly urban areas. [Rental prices](#) too have soared in the countryside since the pandemic, partly attributed to the growth in short term holiday lets.

Together, a lack of services, infrastructure and affordable housing in rural areas all exacerbate individual disadvantage but they also unsettle the balance of rural community life for everyone. If young people, and particularly those of working age are forced to move away, this in turn further erodes the viability of local businesses and services.

Government plays an important role in determining investment in rural communities. In our view, much more can be done to address the structural disadvantage that exists through a combination of direct service provision, subsidy and better regulation.

Government plays an important role in determining investment in rural communities. In our view, much more can be done to address the structural disadvantage that exists through a combination of direct service provision, subsidy and better regulation.

Recommendations

- Review planning policy and housing targets to ensure that every rural community, including those in protected landscapes, can add sufficient new housing to meet the needs of local residents and businesses at a price that is genuinely affordable to those on lower incomes.
 - Provide local authorities with legal powers to ensure a specified proportion of domestic properties are available in perpetuity for people who live or work locally where market pressures and restrictions on new development (such as in National Parks and popular coastal areas) have inflated housing prices to the extent they threaten community life and local businesses.
 - Provide financial stimulus to encourage and help realise a greater diversity and volume of community-led housing in rural areas, akin to the former Community Housing Fund. This will help overcome barriers to delivery caused by the small size and complexity of the developing such schemes.
-
- Continue support for the [Rural Housing Enabler Programme](#) currently managed by ACRE. This is creating a network of advisors able to help communities work with socially minded developers and planners to identify suitable sites and deliver small scale affordable developments that meet local housing need.
 - Restrict, and tax second homes and properties rented out as short term lets in areas where there is a shortage of housing. Revenue from taxation should be ploughed back into these communities for the purposes of building new social homes and/or retaining key services.
 - Re-commit to a [fair funding formula](#) for local government to ensure that the additional costs of delivering rural services are recognised and adequately resourced.
 - Commit, long-term to continued use and expansion of the Rural England Prosperity Fund or development of a similar programme to support small businesses and community infrastructure in the countryside. Consideration should be given to re-instating the local partnership features of the former LEADER programme and re-focussing it on helping local rural economies become diversified away from just tourism and agriculture.

- Change the funding formula for delivering NHS services to include the cost of patients accessing care. Although NHS services are provided free at the point of use, many people living in rural areas need to make costly journeys to reach them, often in the absence of reliable public transport. Investing in non-emergency transport should be a priority.
- Require Integrated Care Boards and NHS Trusts to critically appraise the use of new digital technologies for improving access to health and care services to all segments of the population, including rural communities.
- Commit to achieving 100% digital connectivity, by one means or another, to all households in rural England at the same cost and quality as the market delivers in urban areas.
- Commission training and support at a community level to help people who might otherwise struggle to access services that have become digital by default.
- Provide long-term, consistent funding for public transport in rural areas and devolving decision making over its use to public, regional transport planning authorities.
- Investigate the potential of extending Mobility as a Service (MaaS) solutions beyond suburban areas to see whether transport and transport related services can be integrated into comprehensive and demand responsive apps accessible to whole rural populations.
- Guarantee there is always a comprehensive public consultation whenever any publicly funded school is considered for closure, regardless of whether these are controlled by the LEA or not.
- Create a longer-term grant scheme to support the upgrading or creation of community buildings with the aim of ensuring that every rural community has at its disposal a viable, fit for purpose, multi-use facility.



3. Support community-led action

Many rural communities have a strong sense of place, and a long history of people volunteering and taking action to help each other in the absence of opportunities provided by the market or state. There is a wealth of community-led activity to be cherished, from the volunteer management committees that run England's 10,000+ [village halls](#), to the good neighbour schemes that sprang into action and helped vulnerable people during the pandemic.



We need a government that is prepared to back rural community-led action by increasing the funding and support available to voluntary groups so they can develop initiatives that respond to local needs and have greater control over the circumstances which affect their lives.

Unfortunately, this effort is not valued enough by policy makers. Funding for community initiatives is piecemeal and the age of volunteers is generally getting older. Sometimes it can feel like decisions taken elsewhere run roughshod over local effort.

We need a government that is prepared to back rural community-led action by increasing the funding and support available to voluntary groups so they can develop initiatives that respond to local needs and have greater control over the circumstances which affect their lives.

Recommendations

- Create a long-term rural social investment programme that can help rural communities identify and meet, local social needs including health and wellbeing, access to healthy food, good neighbours' schemes, and local initiatives to tackle loneliness and risks of poor mental health.
- Extend the [Community Ownership Fund](#) so that it is not just about saving existing community assets but supports the acquisition of new assets through which the needs of local residents can be met.
- Invest in an ongoing programme that supports community groups and organisations to develop skills to run local assets and services for the benefit of people locally.



4. Enable rural communities to contribute to, and benefit from the transition to Net Zero

The biggest opportunity for working with rural communities is around tackling the climate crisis and working towards a just transition to Net Zero. To reach the UK's Net Zero target, it is essential to ensure that positive future action can be taken by everyone, wherever they live.




We think the countryside holds the key. Given rural areas comprise 85% of England's land mass and most of its coastline, there is great potential to rewire production and consumption, so it is more sustainable - whether that be changing agricultural practices, welcoming renewable energy generation, improving the energy efficiency of older buildings or reducing the need for people to commute by supporting more remote working. Rural communities too will invariably need help adapting to the consequences of climate change such as rising sea levels, drought, and wildfires.

The challenge, of course, is not just technical. It is about supporting this transition in a way that benefits, not disadvantages rural communities. Such changes are unlikely to work if they are foisted upon rural communities.

The challenge, of course, is not just technical. It is about supporting this transition in a way that benefits, not disadvantages rural communities. Such changes are unlikely to work if they are foisted upon rural communities. In our experience of supporting community-led action, people are much more likely to be supportive of change if they are listened to and have a stake in it.

The next government has a golden opportunity to get behind rural communities and support them to take the lead on the transition to Net Zero.

Recommendations

- 
 Task the new statutory rural advisory body (as recommended previously), with ensuring the UK's plans for land-use, agriculture & food, decarbonising the economy, domestic premises & transport, and national infrastructure including energy are all planned and delivered in a way that actively supports people living in rural areas through a process of change towards decarbonisation.

- Set up a new Rural Green Development Fund to encourage and support community-led Net Zero initiatives such as local energy generation, neighbourhood-wide heating systems, innovative transport solutions, growing schemes, remote worker hubs etc.
- Re-commit to Neighbourhood Planning, but with a new central focus on development that will enable the whole community to become more resilient to climate change. Such plans can become a more positive way of enabling rural communities to provide for current residents' needs, whilst also ensuring future generations can benefit from a 'fair transition' to Net Zero.
- Create incentives to encourage the construction industry to make greater use of locally available and sustainably produced materials such as timber when building new homes. This could go hand in hand with reforms to land management, building regulations, skills training and public funding for social housing.
- Instruct Ofgem to review its regulation of energy markets to formulate a long-term plan for responding to challenges and opportunities associated with the generation, transmission, and retail of energy in rural areas. The aim should be to ensure greater energy security, matching resilience of supply through the national grid with community-owned generation.
- Define a minimum standard of resilience for the rural power distribution network sufficient to enable all rural communities to install both EV charging and electrically powered heat pumps. Where there is inadequate infrastructure, improvements should be funded centrally by government, and not be offset by any increase to consumers' energy bills.

Who we are

[ACRE](#) (Action with Communities in Rural England) is a charity speaking up for and supporting rural communities. It is the national body of the [ACRE Network](#), England's largest rural grouping of community support charities which together reach over 28,000 community groups annually, and lever in over £40 million each year in support of initiatives that equip people with the knowledge, skills, and connections needed to improve their local community.

www.acre.org.uk

Registered Charity No: 1061568

