

# The Rural Challenge

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**Achieving sustainable rural communities for the 21st century**

## The Rural Coalition



# This report

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This report is about a future for rural England in which every rural community can thrive. It presents a shared policy agenda for rural communities, and its overriding objective is to help achieve a positive, lasting legacy of sustainable rural communities in which people enjoy living and working; which are vibrant, distinctive and in keeping with the character of their surroundings, with a full range of good-quality local services; and which enhance local landscapes, heritage and biodiversity while meeting the challenges of climate and economic change. It proposes urgent, implementable changes that pick up and respond to the concerns that the partners in the new Coalition Government have already stated they wish to address.

The Rural Coalition comprises the following organisations:

- Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE).
- Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE).
- The Country Land and Business Association (CLA).
- The Local Government Group (LG Group).
- The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI).
- The Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA).

The Commission for Rural Communities brought the Rural Coalition together in September 2008 and has supported the Rural Coalition Chair and its Members with the production of this report and with technical advice on its content.

The Rural Coalition has also been supported and advised by:

- Action for Market Towns (AMT).
- The Rural Services Network (RSN).
- The Carnegie UK Trust Rural Community Development Programme.
- The Plunkett Foundation.

Further helpful advice has been provided by:

- The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE).
- English Heritage (EH).
- National Association of Local Councils (NALC).
- The National Housing Federation (NHF).
- The English National Parks Authorities Association (ENPAA).

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## Contents

	<b>page</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction, by Matthew Taylor</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Rural Coalition</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Summary of key propositions</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Challenge 1: Meeting rural housing need</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Challenge 2: Building thriving rural economies</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Challenge 3: Delivering great rural services</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Challenge 4: Flourishing market towns</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Challenge 5: Empowering communities</b>	<b>39</b>

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**Action with Communities in Rural England**



**Campaign to Protect Rural England**



**The National Housing Federation**



**The Plunkett Foundation**

# Introduction

By Matthew Taylor, Chair



This report is about a future for rural England in which every rural community can thrive.

In most rural towns and villages, community has always been more important than the state. Our report is not about central direction, the technicalities of new development, or the necessary size of investment in public services. In fact it is not about top-down rules and targets at all. To build the 'Big Society' in rural areas the greatest need is to answer the questions about how government at every level can empower rural communities – to manage and plan for business and residential growth in the countryside over time, to shape and take part in the delivery of services, and to meet the challenges of an age of austerity and climate change – in a way that is:

- more sustainable (to meet the challenges of the environment, climate change and community cohesion);
- more attractive (to address concerns about unattractive, badly planned developments gobbling up the green fields around historic rural communities); and
- more flexible (to tackle the diverse needs and the challenges of tailoring services to small rural communities spread across huge geographical areas).

So the rural challenge today includes supporting new, better-paid and diverse employment opportunities, providing the homes needed for those who live and work in rural areas on low incomes, and maintaining and evolving the services they rely on. The greater challenge is to achieve this while genuinely enhancing rural communities, increasing local and national sustainability in the context of climate change, and continuing to conserve the open countryside to ensure environmental security, food security, and access to open countryside for the enjoyment of all. And given the impacts of the credit crunch, the challenge is also how to deliver all this at less cost to the taxpayer than the existing – often ineffective – approach to these rural communities and rural environments.

The emphasis in this report is on empowering local people, entrepreneurs, community organisations and Parish Councils to achieve all this, supported and enabled by District, County and Unitary Councils. So our recommendations are often directed to local government, and we also make a number of promises of action that our own members will take too. Alongside these are some very important recommendations for necessary action by central government to unlock and enable initiative and community decision-making at the local level, so as to allow this all to happen.

**The overriding objective of this report is to help achieve a positive, lasting legacy of sustainable rural communities in which people enjoy living and working; which are vibrant, distinctive and in keeping with the character of their surroundings, with a full range of good-quality local services; and which enhance local landscapes, heritage and biodiversity while meeting the challenges of climate and economic change.**

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'M. Taylor'.

# The Rural Coalition

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In September 2008 six leading national bodies (see the list of Coalition organisations on the back cover) concerned about the future of rural communities in England came together with the support of the Commission for Rural Communities to launch a prospectus setting out our shared views – *The Future is Rural Too*.<sup>1</sup> The prospectus set out our common concerns and initial proposals for a new approach to rural communities in the face of environmental challenges, financial and social pressures, and the reality of change.

We said that we would consult on our ideas, and engage in our own vigorous debate, to draw up and present a shared policy agenda for rural communities. This would propose urgent, implementable changes that pick up and respond to the concerns that the partners in the new Coalition Government have already stated they wish to address.

This report is the result of that work. As we have developed this vision, our coalition has grown. We look forward to working with people in rural Britain, local Councils and the new Government to deliver an urgent policy shift that will secure the future of rural England.

## The need for change

### What we said in the prospectus:

*'Everyone in this country, wherever they may live and work, needs a strong, confident and sustainable countryside. It is of huge value to us all: environmentally, socially and economically, and will be instrumental in tackling climate change.'*

*'Yet it is all too easy for national governments to treat the nation they govern as a single, homogeneous unit. It may be simpler that way but it's seldom sensible. For fifty years or more, policy has undervalued the countryside and failed to meet the needs of rural*

*communities – and therefore of the nation. In hindsight, the result is starkly apparent. Rural communities have slowly but relentlessly become less and less sustainable and less and less self-sufficient.*

*'On its current course, with no change of policy and no commitment to action, much of the countryside is becoming part dormitory, part theme park and part retirement home. Only if people in rural communities have ready access to local schools, local jobs, local shops and pubs and affordable homes will they and their children thrive, and will the nation meet its environmental and economic needs. Sentimentality plays no part in all of this. A newly invigorated countryside is essential for hard-nosed reasons that affect our national future.'*

*'The Rural Coalition is united in our conviction that our countryside is in urgent need of a new vision, and made-to-measure policies distinguished by the fact that none is imposed blindly from distant places but all emerge democratically from rural communities themselves.'*

*'The plans outlined below are not discrete: they overlap because they have to. A vicious circle needs to be broken and replaced by a virtuous one. So local planning, community involvement, affordable housing, the encouragement of new business opportunities, the provision of good schools, shops, pubs and other leisure facilities need to be seen not as separate issues but as interdependent parts of the necessary whole.'*

Since we published our prospectus in autumn 2009, it has become ever more apparent that the concerns we voiced are shared across rural communities, and across the political spectrum. The Taylor Review, *Living Working Countryside* (2008),<sup>2</sup> helped to crystallise a growing consensus about the future of rural England which emerged towards the end of the last decade:

- Living in the countryside is a popular choice for many, including those who do not work in the

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1 *The Future is Rural Too*. Rural Coalition prospectus, 2009.

[www.acre.org.uk/DOCUMENTS/Rural%20Coalition/The%20Future%20is%20Rural%20Too.pdf](http://www.acre.org.uk/DOCUMENTS/Rural%20Coalition/The%20Future%20is%20Rural%20Too.pdf)

2 *Living Working Countryside. The Taylor Review of Rural Economy and Affordable Housing*. Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008. [www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/livingworkingcountryside](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/livingworkingcountryside)

local economy of rural communities. In 2008 alone the net migration from urban to rural areas was 92,000 people.<sup>3</sup> This migratory trend has social, environmental and economic implications – not least that, as increasing numbers made the choice to move from urban to rural communities, with limited housing supply, house prices in many rural settlements were pushed up beyond the means of local people.

- The stock of affordable homes in rural areas has historically been proportionately lower than in urban areas. A slow rate of build, and a significant decline in the number of affordable homes as Right to Buy sales have not been replaced, has impacted disproportionately on the current rural stock of affordable housing. By 2008, 315,506 households in predominantly rural districts were on Local Authority housing waiting lists, but the proportion of affordable homes in rural areas is little more than half that in urban communities.<sup>4</sup> Low local wages and a lack of affordable homes in our villages mean that the people who do the work in the countryside – on the farms, in the shops, in the huge diversity of local businesses – are increasingly priced out of housing near where they work. Already many rural workers are forced to commute from towns, and some businesses now fail to find employees or rely on migrant temporary labour. ONS (Office for National Statistics) figures show that in June 2010 there were 91,581 unfilled vacancies in rural England.<sup>5</sup>
- Rural economies provide millions of jobs, are home to half a million businesses, and are worth nearly £145,000 million to the national economy every year.<sup>6</sup> They are critical for meeting the need for national sustainability in the context of climate change. The planning system has rightly played a decisive role in protecting the open countryside, historic towns and charming villages which are of themselves assets of significant environmental, social, cultural, and economic value. Too often, however, planning practice for rural areas has failed to meet the unique housing, work and services requirements of the people who live and work in these communities. With fewer young families and low-income households able to access housing in villages, services like schools, buses, and Post Offices become even less viable – and if lost altogether further threaten the sustainability of communities. From 1998 to 2009 there have been 285 rural primary school closures,<sup>7</sup> and the pace of closures of village schools is rising once again, despite the presumption against the closure of village schools adopted by Government in 2009.<sup>8</sup>
- Rural England is actually more dependent on public sector jobs than is urban England. On average 33% of jobs in predominantly rural authorities are public sector, compared with 27% for other authorities. That means that as public spending is cut back, the economic, employment and service delivery impacts are potentially greatest across rural communities.<sup>9</sup>
- Rural services will be more vulnerable than most to public finance constraints since rural service delivery, even at its most effective, is more expensive per head of population than in urban areas.<sup>10</sup> Pressures to deliver more for less money will inevitably lead to further loss of local services altogether – unless communities are empowered, as the term ‘Big Society’ suggests, to design appropriate local service levels and means of delivery, building on a rural culture of self-help that is already very high.

3 *State of the Countryside 2010*. CRC 119. Commission for Rural Communities, July 2010. <http://ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/sotc/sotc2010.pdf>

4 *State of the Countryside Update: Housing demand and supply*. CRC Web 42. Commission for Rural Communities, February 2010. [www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/CRC%20Web%2042.pdf](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/CRC%20Web%2042.pdf)

5 Jobcentre Plus, Unfilled vacancies data. Office for National Statistics, June 2010

6 *State of the Countryside 2010*. CRC 119. Commission for Rural Communities, July 2010. <http://ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/sotc/sotc2010.pdf>

7 *State of the Countryside Update: Children and educational services*. CRC Web 43. Commission for Rural Communities, March 2010. [http://ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/CRC%20WEB43%20SOTC%20Update\\_TAGGED180310.pdf](http://ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/CRC%20WEB43%20SOTC%20Update_TAGGED180310.pdf)

8 See [www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/publications/documents/laeruralschoolclosures/](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/publications/documents/laeruralschoolclosures/)

9 See [www.roseregeneration.co.uk/media/Cameron%20County%20Press%20Release%20Background.pdf](http://www.roseregeneration.co.uk/media/Cameron%20County%20Press%20Release%20Background.pdf)

10 In 2004 Defra (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) commissioned Secta to review published evidence that supports (or contradicts) the Rural Premium. Secta found that collectively the studies reviewed concluded that ‘rural areas face greater difficulties in providing services to the same standard of effectiveness at the same levels of costs as in urban areas and that as a result either cost is higher (in rural areas) or performance (response times, access and so on) is lower’

# Summary of key propositions

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We have argued that the needs for change described above are paramount. But what form should those changes take? In this report we set out in some detail, across several policy areas, what needs to happen and who needs to do it.

Much, if not most, of the actions needed must come from local government and agencies, together with the voluntary and community sectors – including of course members of the Rural Coalition itself. ‘Community-led’ planning is the key to this approach. In other words, the solutions will need to come from the bottom up as well as, if not more than, from the top down. National Government will, however, clearly have a key role to play in articulating the vision and direction of change.

These solutions are summarised below in a series of **key propositions**. These propositions are set out in much more detail in the main report, and references to the recommendations and associated text are given wherever appropriate.

**1 Creating and maintaining sustainable rural communities** lies at the heart of the Rural Coalition’s message – a consensus about the need for a more positive and balanced approach to achieving social, economic and environmental well-being in our rural communities, shaped and delivered by community-led planning. This will call for:

**1.1 Local Planning Authorities** to draw up **local plans and strategies** which are based on a thorough **understanding of local rural economies and society**, a **comprehensive assessment of the social, economic and environmental criteria which determine sustainable development**, and a **genuine incorporation of community-led plans and aspirations**. These must not assume that rural communities are inherently ‘unsustainable’, even the smaller ones.

**See Recommendations 1 and 3**

**1.2 Very short but clear messages in the new, reduced national planning policy framework** which support and reflect the overriding objectives of **building and maintaining thriving sustainable rural communities** with the **genuine engagement and involvement of local people**.

**See Recommendation 2**

**1.3 Rural communities** which take advantage of the opportunities to instigate and complete **community-led planning** activities – helping the community to decide on local priorities and take responsibility for making things happen, working jointly with other communities where necessary and appropriate.

**See Recommendations 1, 3 and 33**

**1.4** Members of the Rural Coalition and others to provide **advice and support** for the above, through **good practice** which demonstrates, inspires and disseminates ways by which community-led sustainable planning can be implemented.

**See the websites of the Rural Coalition members, on the back cover of this report.**

**2 Meeting the affordable housing needs of rural communities** remains an urgent priority. In order to generate a step-change in provision we propose that existing mechanisms such as Exceptions Sites and Developer Agreements should be augmented by new ways to generate affordable housing ‘from the bottom up’. We support the principle of local involvement contained in the ‘Community Right to Build’ announced on 23 July. It must be right to offer local people a clear deal in which they can progress schemes which are based on local needs and ambitions, with a very high degree of assurance that they will have an unbureaucratic and straightforward response from the planning system. This Right to Build should remain within the framework of the current planning system. National planning policy should include a presumption that



local plans will include such an approach. We would see local plans setting out clear criteria along the lines set out in the following paragraph (although the precise terms should be determined locally), with an assurance that if these criteria are met, permission will be granted.

**2.1 National Government and Local Planning Authorities should promote and support planning policies – including site allocations – that favour granting consent where local communities bring forward small schemes to meet locally-identified needs that meet the following criteria:**

- Parish Council support as part of a community-led plan backed by the principal authority councillors from that community.
- Sound evidence of need.
- The scheme is affordable in perpetuity.
- A suitable, viable site.
- Appropriate scale.
- Good design.

**See Recommendation 4**

**2.2 The ‘Community Right to Build’ and local policies giving effect to it should enable schemes to include one or more of the following elements,** dependent on the needs identified by the community: market housing, affordable housing, workspace, retail space, recreational space, community facilities, and sites for renewable energy production. Approval of such schemes should reflect the same criteria offered under 2.1, above.

**See Recommendations 4 and 5**

**2.3** The Rural Coalition and other bodies will offer more detailed advice, experience and an enabling role on how the recommendations in paragraphs 2.1 and 2.2 above can be implemented most effectively.

**2.4** The Government should explore and develop with the HCA (the Homes and Communities Agency), Housing Associations and Local Authorities **options for intermediate affordable housing** to deliver more affordable homes with less grant to meet local needs.

**See Recommendation 8**

**2.5** The Government should give Councils the freedom to manage the finances of their own housing, through **reform of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) system**, and the power to **keep all income from selling existing Council homes**.

**See Recommendation 6**

**2.6** The Government should bring forward advice and incentives to **encourage landowners** to provide low-cost land and/or affordable housing.

**See Recommendation 9**

**2.7** The forthcoming Decentralisation and Localism Bill should **rule out clearly vexatious or trivial village green applications** blocking community development.

**See Recommendation 7**

**2.8** The Government’s proposals for a ‘Green Deal’ to finance and deliver energy-efficiency improvements to existing housing should take account of the **particular issues facing much rural housing**.

**See Recommendation 11**

### **3 Building thriving rural communities**

is not just about addressing rural economic problems. Even more it is about exploring and developing the huge potential which rural areas contain for providing essential resources of food, water and energy; for developing the green economy; and for embracing a much wider range of economic activities – especially those linked to IT and home-working. We propose that:

**3.1** Where they have significant rural territory **Local Enterprise Partnerships** should ensure that people in rural areas (**including sparsely populated and peripheral areas**) have a strong voice, and that there are specific strategies and programmes for enterprise and employment in rural areas.

**See Recommendation 12**

**3.2** The Government should consult on how any redesigned **business support services can best meet the needs of businesses located in rural areas**.

**See Recommendation 13**

**3.3** The CLA (Country Land and Business Association) and the LG Group (Local Government Group)

commit to work together to encourage the adoption of **innovative and distinctly rural approaches to employment and enterprise in rural areas**.

- 3.4** Local government should promote, protect and maintain a **good supply of appropriate sites and premises for all kinds of businesses in smaller rural communities**, including new build and conversion of farm buildings and farm diversification.

[See Recommendations 14 and 15](#)

- 3.5** The new Government should ensure that national planning policy and guidance supports **alterations or extensions to the home to encourage appropriate local business growth** (by making appropriate changes to Part 1 of the General Permitted Development Order).

[See Recommendation 16](#)

- 3.6** The Government should conduct a **review of the tax regime in relation to work-based home extensions and small-scale premises**.

[See Recommendation 17](#)

- 3.7** The RTPI (Royal Town Planning Institute), the TCPA (Town and Country Planning Association) and the LG Group will work together to explore model Local Development Orders which could **remove need for formal change of use, alteration or extension planning permissions to enable people to work or run a business from their home**.

- 3.8** The Government proposals on broadband should encourage **the most appropriate means by which communities can obtain high-speed broadband access, whether through commercial supply or community-led initiatives**.

[See Recommendation 18](#)

- 3.9** New national policy on renewable energy should steer local plans to **permit acceptable small-scale renewable energy developments in the countryside**, supported by the RTPI, the TCPA and the LG Group working together to advise and encourage such schemes.

[See Recommendation 10](#)

**4 Delivering great local services** has always been a challenge for rural areas and will be even more so in an age of public funding austerity. We believe that the way forward is to adopt new 'smarter' approaches which are specifically tailored to rural circumstances and needs, rather than continuing with traditional (urban-based) models; and, crucially, to adopt approaches which tap local community energies and knowledge both to shape and deliver those services, in line with the Government's emphasis on the 'Big Society'. We propose that:

- 4.1 Before finalising the Comprehensive Spending Review, the Government should review the proportionate impact in rural areas and take proper account of the additional costs faced by those providing essential services across rural areas.**

[See Recommendation 19](#)

- 4.2** When using geographical data of any kind, government and public sector agencies should ensure that they have considered whether **small-area data more reflective of the rural context** exists, or can be obtained.

[See Recommendation 20](#)

- 4.3 Universal Service Obligations** are needed to ensure that companies do not use new opportunities introduced for competition to **'cherry-pick' urban areas at the cost of dispersed rural communities**.

[See Recommendation 21](#)

- 4.4** The Government should ensure **'rural proofing' of proposals, scaling back inspection frameworks and activity** to help public services and the third sector in rural areas to innovate in providing low-cost service delivery.

[See Recommendation 22](#)

- 4.5** The **'Community Right to Bid'** needs to encompass **community-led initiatives** that extend the reach of public services or provide **partial solutions to retaining local provision as well as 'like for like'** services via commissioning.

[See Recommendations 23 and 23a](#)

- 4.6** The Government should work with the Post Office to achieve a **full range of financial services through rural Post Office branches**.

[See Recommendation 24](#)

**4.7** Public service providers should consider options for **shared or multi-purpose service outlets**, outreach and mobile services to serve small rural communities, before instituting cuts which leave them entirely or largely without certain local services.

**See Recommendation 25**

**4.8** Government proposals to work with the private sector to develop IT infrastructure should seek to improve access and reduce the cost of providing public services in rural communities through **e-services**, including assessing the benefits of wiring up community facilities like village halls as a first step.

**See Recommendation 26**

**4.9** Local and strategic **transport planning** should take greater account of **access issues for dispersed rural communities** and consider **innovative programmes supporting community solutions at less cost**.

**See Recommendation 27**

**4.10** Some of the **savings made by withdrawing traditional services** should be provided to support communities offering to preserve services through **small-scale, lower-cost, community-led solutions**.

**See Recommendations 25 and 34**

**5 Flourishing market towns** are a mainstay of rural economic and social life. They also make a big impact on the rural living environment. But too often that impact has not been improved by new development over recent decades. We believe that the quality of new housing and supporting services needs to be radically improved – to be more distinctive and sensitive to local place, to be greener, and to engage the local community in ways which ensure that they genuinely meet local needs. We propose that:

**5.1** The Government and the HCA should ensure that best practice know-how is available to Local Authorities/private sector partnerships to take a **whole community approach to development**, including jobs, services, mixed housing, and sustainable funding models for the **long-term management of green infrastructure** in new communities. Community developments should adopt the Natural England recommendation that people should have ‘an accessible natural green

space, of at least 2 hectares in size, no more than 300 metres (5 minutes’ walk) from home’.

**See Recommendations 30, 31 and 32**

**5.2** Local Authorities should always **involve the community in shaping sustainable proposals** through **effective participation** such as ‘Enquiry by Design’ and ‘Planning for Real’.

**See Recommendation 29**

**5.3** The LG Group, the TCPA, the RTPI, CPRE (Campaign to Protect Rural England), and CABE (the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) will work together with other relevant bodies on **help and advice** to develop market towns in ways which produce **attractive and sustainable settlements**, building on the excellent standards set by the Eco-towns PPS.

**See Recommendation 28**

**6 Empowering communities** is a central tenet of the Rural Coalition’s vision for the future. It is also a fundamental part of the Coalition Government’s ‘Big Society’ agenda. Fortunately, rural communities enjoy a long history of innovative and sustained involvement in decisions and activities which affect their lives. This experience provides an excellent foundation for rural communities taking on an even bigger role in the drive towards more localised policy-making and action. However, community-led or ‘bottom-up’ planning will not just happen by itself. It will need very focused help and support. We propose that:

**6.1** National and local government should recognise and **adopt community-led planning as ‘best practice’** as part of putting in place the mechanisms to underpin the ‘Big Society’.

**See Recommendation 33**

**6.2** To deliver the ‘Big Society’, localism and empowering communities, the Government needs to start by **building local capacity** for delivery – for example through support for local enablers and activists, advice and training, and modest funding opportunities.

**See Recommendation 37**

**6.3** Parish and Town Councils should become the **guardian’ of the community-led plan**, monitoring progress and regularly refreshing the priorities in the light of changing circumstances.

**See Recommendations 35 and 36**

**6.4** Local Authorities should recognise that there will often be a very strong case for individual **communities obtaining visible benefits, community facilities and community-led services from accepting more development in their area**, to support community facilities and community-led services. The forthcoming Decentralisation and Localism Bill should ensure that there are straightforward mechanisms to enable this.

**See Recommendation 38**

### We need to act now

These measures will not only improve economic, social and environmental sustainability; they will create a virtuous cycle. If more affordable housing, better services and a more vibrant economy means people on a broader range of incomes can afford to live in rural communities, it may increase their social diversity and sustainability. If they support a broader range of community services, shops and work, then people will need to travel less, not more.

In terms of housing, jobs or services, existing or new development, or stretching increasingly limited government funding further, we need to move away from asking 'Is this settlement sustainable?' – which too often leads to a decision to prevent any development, cut back services, and refuse any change. Rather, we must ask how can we enhance the sustainability of this community, taking account of social, economic and environmental concerns – which means embracing the right sort of change. And the people we need to ask first are the communities themselves.

Finally, **the Rural Coalition itself is committed to building on this report by continuing to work together to influence the thinking and behaviour of national and local politicians and planning professionals.**

# Challenge 1

## Meeting rural housing need

### What we said in our prospectus:

*'The protection of the built heritage, natural environment and landscape in and around rural villages continues to be critical. But when protection becomes thoughtless – when the immediate instinct is to say no to almost everything – then 'protection' can have a perversely negative effect. Villages are denied the chance to respond organically to change, and so to remain vibrant living, working communities.*

*'Sustainability' doesn't mean a slavish adherence to what exists – no development at all can lead to the local school, shop and pub closing for lack of custom as the community ages, or as commuters and holiday homes displace local families.*

*'Villages need to be encouraged and empowered to make the changes needed to sustain them. Affordable housing can meet the needs of those working and growing up in rural communities who could never otherwise afford a local home, and local jobs help sustain schools and other services that may close if working families can no longer afford to live there.'*

Government references 'smaller rural communities' as those settlements with populations of fewer than 3,000<sup>11</sup> – the often tiny rural villages and hamlets scattered across the English countryside. Such settlements are home to 65% of all rural residents, some 6.16 million people.<sup>12</sup>

### Housing need in smaller rural communities

Through the Government's commitment to the 'Big Society' and 'Local Housing Trusts', there is real potential for enhancing the sustainability of many of

these smaller rural communities by taking decisions locally, with local people empowered to deliver the development that they want and need.

It is clear that most rural communities are facing a particularly severe housing crisis. As a result of social housing stock declining because Right to Buy sales have not been replaced, and the slow pace of new rural non-market affordable house building, the figures today (including Housing Association stock) show that only 13% of houses in rural areas are affordable homes, compared with 21% in urban areas.<sup>13</sup>

Yet the very visible legacy of relatively recent development in some villages is one of poorly designed housing, unsympathetic to its surroundings. Other villages have retained much of their character only through little or no development taking place. This has contributed across many rural villages and hamlets to a resistance to more housing development of any kind, both market and affordable homes, of whatever scale or design.

That mood is now changing. The English countryside is an asset which should rightly be protected against indiscriminate and inappropriate development. But the landscape and environmental impact of the development of a handful of sensitively located affordable homes to serve small rural communities must not be exaggerated. As the symptoms of housing shortage gradually accumulate and undermine the social, economic and environmental sustainability of villages, saying 'no' to any kind of development can become part of the problem, not the solution.

Recognising this, many more communities are adopting a positive attitude towards provision of affordable housing for those with a local connection. This becomes stronger support (and more landowners come forward)

11 See Planning Policy Statement 3: *Housing*. Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010. [www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/pps3housing](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/pps3housing)

12 *State of the Countryside 2004*. CA 170. Countryside Agency, 2004. Figures derived using Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and Office for National Statistics Urban Areas Settlements with Census 2001 data

13 *Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix (HSSA) 2007*. Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007. [www.communities.gov.uk/housing/housingresearch/housingstatistics/housingstatisticsby/localauthorityhousing/dataforms/357553/hssa200607/](http://www.communities.gov.uk/housing/housingresearch/housingstatistics/housingstatisticsby/localauthorityhousing/dataforms/357553/hssa200607/)



when people become aware that the affordable housing will be kept in perpetuity for local needs and that its design will be sympathetic to local character. There is a wide range of guidance recently made available to aid this<sup>14</sup> – in each case, however, the process starts by the community itself developing a shared understanding of the ways in which the sustainability of the community can be preserved and enhanced.

### Recommendation 1

**Local authorities should formally take into account community-led plans, where they have been developed, in the preparation of local plans.**

### Recommendation 2

**Most decisions on the future development or otherwise of rural communities must be taken locally. This does not require the current 2,500 pages of national planning guidance, but sustainable development in the countryside is of national importance and deserves some clear statements of principle in any new national planning policy framework – including that local planning policy must balance the protection and enhancement of the natural and built environment in the countryside with ensuring the economic and social viability of rural communities.**

### Recommendation 3

**Local plans should be based on a thorough understanding of local rural economies and society, a comprehensive assessment of the social, economic, and environmental criteria determining sustainable development, and genuine and effective engagement with local communities (individually and collectively).**

## Rural Exception Sites – the story so far

'Rural Exception Sites' can already permit affordable housing development to meet local needs in communities of (usually) less than 3,000 population, on sites where this would not normally be allowed – *for housing guaranteed to be affordable in perpetuity, accommodating households meeting the local connection criteria with the parish or village.* If no-one

'local' meeting the criteria comes forward, a 'cascade' comes into play, and the housing is offered to people in similar need in surrounding parishes.

There are many good examples of how exception sites can work – but as the system functions at the moment it is failing to reach its potential. At present, getting such proposals through the planning system is often challenging and protracted. It is clear from experience that successful exception site developments are characterised by 'bottom-up' community-led schemes facilitated by engagement with the local community, often through the Parish Council but also with the strategic support of the local planning and housing authorities – and starting with a debate about planning the needs and future of the community, before specific schemes are considered. This engagement is the fundamental first step to delivering more affordable housing in many rural communities. Without it, opposition grows, and delivery stalls.

## Our new approach – empower the parish

The Government has already recognised the importance of empowering small communities, with proposals for **Local Housing Trusts**. We share much of that vision, and believe that to work effectively it needs to be underpinned by simple, clear criteria empowering the community directly through the parish (or clusters of parishes).

Local Housing Trusts are seen as a way of overcoming the acute shortage of appropriate housing for local people in rural areas. The Carnegie Commission considered that Trust models offered particularly strong opportunities for providing affordable rural housing as a community-owned asset, and called for national and regional support to ensure that the early pioneers will be followed by a mainstream social movement to transform rural affordable housing provision.

**Parish support** should be a trigger for such community-led affordable housing schemes, subject to the five further criteria below (**need, scale, viability, affordability in perpetuity, and design**). Because

<sup>14</sup> Including *Affordable Rural Housing and the Historic Environment*. English Heritage, 2009; *Creating a Sense of Place: A design guide*. Business in the Community/The Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment, 2006; and *Affordable Housing Keeps Villages Alive*. Campaign to Protect Rural England/National Housing Federation/Commission for Rural Communities/Countryside Alliance/Action with Communities in Rural England, July 2010

most Parish Councils are elected, they are accountable. Where a Parish Council is supporting a proposal that meets these criteria, the Local Planning Authority should have a duty to respond positively. The right of the parish to develop detailed proposals for a small affordable housing development would be an important responsibility. Parishes would not carry a veto over housing development, ensuring that other proposals are not prevented from coming forward. But parishes/communities now need a clear right to initiate community-led affordable housing schemes – a simpler and more accountable approach than the 90% support required in a local referendum envisaged by Government.

**The following are the key criteria for community-led development:**

- **Evidence of need** for housing that will be affordable in perpetuity and reserved for people with a local connection. Local Authorities must maintain an up-to-date assessment of housing need in their Strategic Housing Market Assessment – parish by parish, looking at the specific needs and circumstances of each community as part of the community-led parish planning process. A simple local needs survey can provide this information where it is not already available.
- **Appropriate scale and style.** Community-led affordable housing needs to be relevant to the existing community and its needs, taking into account the value of the landscape, the character of the settlement and the site of the proposal. In these communities, it is locally made decisions about half a dozen or a dozen homes that are crucial to their sustainability, not national, regional or even district targets. However, when larger-scale development is considered, it needs to be in the context of wider planning issues.
- **A viable, available site.** The site must meet basic planning requirements as stipulated in local planning policy – for example concerning flooding or subsidence, difficult and/or dangerous access, very high environmental significance or dislocation from village services or the settlement pattern.
- **The affordable homes will be kept affordable in perpetuity, to meet local needs using a transparent ‘parish cascade’.**

- **Good design, agreed with the community.** Successful developments depend on sensitive design that responds to its surroundings. A full planning application, setting out every design detail, is not a requirement for exception sites, although it is commonplace because it allows all aspects of the scheme to be agreed. However, agreement on detailed design may be easier once the principle of the proposal has been agreed with the community and preliminary ‘outline’ permission granted and the site secured.

**Good design**

**Good design should consider the following:**

- Infrastructure, including green infrastructure, has to be designed in at an early stage to help avoid over-reliance on the car.
- Design should generally be simple and ‘tenure-blind’ in the context of other buildings.
- Building materials and styles should reflect local precedent, even if it is not possible for them to be locally sourced.
- Individual homes should be grouped to endorse and support the village context, and should contribute to a strong street scene.
- Parking solutions should not dominate a scheme, and should be carefully considered to reduce the impact of parking spaces on the character and layout of the development.
- Details of features such as doors, windows, chimneys, roof pitch, metalwork and joinery should be carefully considered for their appropriateness.
- Lifetime homes principles must be applied to all schemes. Long-term flexibility – and the changing needs of occupiers – should be anticipated in internal arrangement as far as possible.
- The overall design should enhance a village scene, rather than detract from it.

Source: CABE ( advice to the Rural Coalition)

The 'Big Society' proposals on Local Housing Trusts envisage a 'presumption for granting' applications from communities to develop plans for land to support a *range* of needs.

To deliver this aspiration, it will be crucial that such Trust mechanisms enable communities to fill a wide range of gaps and deficiencies in current provision of facilities and services, as well as housing. This could be a mix of housing, employment land, community facilities and services, biodiversity, recreation, and land-based community enterprises for green energy and recycling. The exact mix would require a Trust proposal to reflect a robust evidence base on community needs and have significant community support.

As communities take on responsibilities for a range of assets, the Carnegie Commission recognised that there needs to be a parallel growth in the provision of technical advice – support focused on making sure that acquisition results in long-term viability rather than liability, with a focus on a realistic business plan, and where necessary with investment and revenue commitments or endowments alongside the land or building.

The National Housing Federation has recently agreed to host the National Community Land Trust Network to help overcome these barriers by providing technical support to local Trusts, and to work with mortgage lenders and the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) to ensure that funding streams are available.

As proposed by the Coalition Government, Local Housing Trusts could generate income through the sale of open market housing, and by the renting of workspace and community enterprise initiatives that might be included. The Development Trusts Association (DTA) points to the need to incentivise new approaches to finance, including promoting community share and bond issues, with community investment by individuals being linked to Gift Aid tax relief.

The DTA also suggests that, in recession, there is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for community asset acquisition in order to provide the foundation for resilient communities. It is exploring community 'land-banking', in which the community acquires land for future community uses, and other fast-track mechanisms that enable a fast response to the economic downturn.

**The Coalition Government's proposed criteria on support for a Local Housing Trust initially focused on the proportion of residents who support the scheme. The Rural Coalition believes this to be potentially divisive and self-defeating. We believe that the criteria should lie within the mechanism already proposed for the community to decide collaboratively on local priorities and actions – i.e. community-led planning.** The criteria should relate to whether the proposal has been well researched via a high-quality community-led plan process, has a strong viable business plan which meets the community's needs, and is supported by the Parish Council.

Because they are community led, local Trusts are seen as providing a particularly clear reassurance that homes will remain affordable in perpetuity to the benefit of the local community, potentially encouraging greater community support and offers of low-cost or free land.

However, such Trusts are not without difficulties. Unless they partner an existing social housing provider, it is difficult to access funding and expertise in both delivery and management of the development, potentially raising costs and long-term management issues. It is also important that a clearly fair, criteria-based and impartial process is set up to allocate the homes to local people, and that they are then well managed.

These are all issues that need to be overcome, usually through a partnership with an existing affordable housing provider (or an established umbrella Trusts organisation with the scale and experience to overcome these hurdles).

The Rural Coalition also believes that other aspects of Local Housing Trust implementation need careful exploration. The behaviour of landowners, and developers with options on land in anticipation of, at some time, succeeding with open market planning applications, may inflate land prices, reducing the viability of community-owned schemes. Care should be taken to ensure that Local Housing Trust models genuinely stem from the community and remain under the control of local people rather than external partners whose interests may lie elsewhere.



**Recommendation 4**

**We welcome the Government's commitment to community-led development and commend the Local Housing Trust proposals in principle as a contribution to the developing policy. But the Government should reconsider whether the potential for as few as 10% of residents to block development, and the requirement for community ownership, undermine the intention of the policy. We propose that local communities have assurance that if they bring forward a small scheme to meet locally-identified needs, and it meets six key criteria (Parish Council support agreed by the community in a community-led plan, evidence of need, appropriate scale, a suitable viable site, affordable in perpetuity, and good design), local planning policy should favour granting consent.**

**Recommendation 5**

**An appropriate extension of policy on Local Housing Trusts should enable community-owned schemes to comprise a mix of uses, according to the communities' needs – which might include one or more of: affordable housing, workspace, retail, recreational space, community facilities, and sites for renewable energy production.**

## How do we afford the affordable housing?

### Unlocking the potential of local authority finance

National barriers to affordable housing affect rural areas as much as urban ones – in particular access to funding and investment, especially given the impact of the economic downturn on the implementation of planning obligations (Section 106 agreements<sup>15</sup>) which were used to deliver much of the affordable housing built before the credit crunch and subsequent recession.

Recently we have seen some positive steps towards unlocking the potential for Councils to help bring

forward more investment in affordable housing. The HCA Local Authority New Build Fund gave Councils access to funding to build 4,000 homes in the next year. But Councils have the potential to build many more affordable homes, and to redevelop and refurbish many more existing properties, if key steps are taken.

**Recommendation 6**

**To maximise the ability of Local Authorities to support affordable housing delivery financially, the Government should:**

- **Give Councils the freedom to manage the finances of their own housing, through implementing reform of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) system.**
- **Give Councils the power to keep all income from selling existing Council homes. Councils can keep funding from the sale of newly built homes under the Right to Buy legislation (currently 75% of funds from the sale of existing properties still goes to the Treasury).<sup>16</sup>**

### Unlocking the barriers placed by village green applications

There is evidence that increasing vexatious use is being made of the Town and Village Green registration process to slow down or block affordable housing developments, despite local support.

Designed to preserve village greens as the traditional focus for village life and the playing of games, this status has increasingly been sought on inappropriate or unsuitable sites, for example on existing agricultural land. The intention has clearly been primarily to thwart the planning process and in many cases prevent the provision of much needed affordable housing. At the least, such claims cause considerable delay and (unrecoverable) costs to landowners and Councils. At worst they will prevent alternative uses in perpetuity if successful.

<sup>15</sup> Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 allows a Local Planning Authority to enter into a legally binding agreement or planning obligation with a landowner in association with the granting of planning permission

<sup>16</sup> *Housing Revenue Account Manual 2006-2007 Edition*. Department for Communities and Local Government, July 2007. [www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/pdf/hrmanual0607.pdf](http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/pdf/hrmanual0607.pdf)

### Recommendation 7

**The Government should include in the forthcoming Decentralisation and Localism Bill provision to make the local plan the sole mechanism whereby green and open space is designated and protected; or at least (i) introduce a fast-track preliminary stage to the Town and Village Green registration process whereby groundless and vexatious claims can be dismissed rapidly and (ii) rule out applications after planning permission has been granted for development on the land.**

### Unlocking the potential of intermediate housing

We also need to think more broadly about what we mean by affordable, as this greatly affects the cost in terms of subsidy, and there are several different forms of 'affordable' housing:

- Traditional rented Council or Housing Association properties, allocated to those in priority need and rented at well below market prices – requiring significant grant to build.
- Part-ownership, capped-price and low-rent models termed 'intermediate affordable housing'. There are a range of such schemes designed to allow people to buy an initial low-cost share in the ownership in the property and 'staircase up' their ownership as they can afford to. In rural areas, to guarantee affordability in perpetuity, this is limited by Government rules to a maximum of 80% of the open-market value.
- Outright sale with prices capped in perpetuity at an affordable level (generally a multiple of local incomes or a fixed percentage discount from open market value).
- Low-rent (but not as low as social rent) models can meet local needs, especially for those in low-paid employment.

Intermediate housing (a term covering all but the first of these forms) needs less grant support to build than social rent housing requires. Indeed, intermediate affordable housing is delivered without any subsidy in some areas, especially where land is offered free or at low cost. At a time when Government affordable housing delivery grant is set to be sharply cut, these intermediate

options may increasingly step into the gap. They allow small communities to deliver much of the affordable housing they need, with much less or no Government grant – and while not affordable for all, they can address the needs of working people on low incomes in rural areas; the people who are currently least likely to be able to access a home since they do not have sufficient need to be allocated one of the few social rented homes, and yet do not have sufficient income to afford a home on the open market.

### Recommendation 8

**The Government should explore and develop with the HCA, Housing Associations and Local Authorities options for intermediate affordable housing to deliver more affordable homes with less grant to meet local needs, to support informed decision-making by Housing Associations and Local Authorities on what would work in particular communities.**

### Unlocking the potential of landowners to deliver affordable housing

Rural landowners contribute to the delivery of affordable rural housing in a number of ways. Directly, rural landowners provide around a third of private rented housing in rural areas, much of it at controlled rents. Many rural landowners still provide housing for their workers and retired workers, either free of charge or for very low payment. Indirectly, many landowners have made land available to rural Housing Associations, sometimes free of charge and often at significantly below market value. Without the generosity of rural landowners, the housing crisis in the countryside would be significantly worse, and Government should recognise this.

When surveyed for the Taylor Review by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), the most significant factor for rural landowners considering releasing more land for affordable housing at a discounted rate was **the assurance that it will remain affordable and for local people in perpetuity**. In some cases, rural landowners are keen to bring forward their own funded, built and managed schemes to allay their fears about release of properties onto the open market, but this is not always allowed on exception sites. These and similar issues were addressed in *Guidance for Local Authorities on Incentivising Landowners to Bring forward Land for Affordable Housing on Rural Exception Sites*, the

consultation by CLG<sup>17</sup> (the Department for Communities and Local Government) on this aspect of the Taylor Review, and the new Government should urgently take forward these issues. The Government should also consider tangible encouragement and incentives, such as tax incentives to help speed up the delivery of affordable rural housing. Government guidelines on incentivising landowners to bring forward land for rural affordable housing will also help to ensure that the use of such incentives is not seen to undermine the integrity and transparency of the planning system.

**Recommendation 9**

**The Government should bring forward advice on how Local Authorities and communities can encourage landowners to provide low-cost land and/or affordable housing, building on the CLG consultation on guidance for local authorities on incentivising landowners to bring forward land for affordable housing on rural exception sites.**

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<sup>17</sup> *Guidance for Local Authorities on Incentivising Landowners to Bring Forward Land for Affordable Housing on Rural Exception Sites.* Department for Communities and Local Government, November 2009.  
[www.communities.gov.uk/documents/planningandbuilding/pdf/incentivisingconsultation.pdf](http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/planningandbuilding/pdf/incentivisingconsultation.pdf)

## Challenge 2

# Building thriving rural economies

### What we said in our prospectus:

*'Not all economic developments are good and not all economic developments are bad. To distinguish between the two, on a case-by-case basis, is seldom easy. It seems safer to say no. As a result, potentially valuable kinds of economic development are all too often blocked in principle, without considering the contribution they can make to supporting both the local community and the national economy – and without undesirable consequences for heritage or environment. The result is that local jobs in rural communities are amongst the lowest paid in the UK – 20% below the national average. Vital opportunities to use the land to meet the challenge of climate change are missed, and the fruitful development of both rural communities and the national economy is held back.'*

*'Climate change makes land-based businesses even more important, and modern communications makes all kinds of businesses more workable in rural communities than ever before. Planning policies need to recognise that, if proposed developments are in keeping with their location and of suitable scale, they should be assessed with optimism. And if they seem likely to help local employment needs and increase the economic, social and environmental sustainability of even the smallest communities, they should be warmly welcomed.'*

### The importance of strong rural economies

As food security moves sharply up the agenda, so rightly has the recognition of our farms and food producers. However, the rural economy is not just about farms and land-based business. Millions of people live and work in the countryside, at least half a million businesses are based there, and rural business is worth nearly £145,00 million to the national economy every year.<sup>18</sup>

Creating and maintaining strong rural economies is critical to supporting sustainable and vibrant rural communities. Strong rural economies offer those living in rural areas better opportunities for work in their local community. More and better-quality local employment opportunities help to reduce the out-migration of younger people, and retain skilled graduates. Being able to live and work closer to, or in, the home, also helps to deliver national sustainability objectives by reducing the need to commute long distances to work, and so minimising harmful vehicle emissions.

Rural economic development also helps to revitalise the wider local economy – at the local level providing spending power and a daytime presence to support and act as a catalyst for other local businesses, shops and services such as Post Offices, and so benefiting the whole community; at national level harnessing the entrepreneurial and exporting potential of businesses in rural areas.

### Rural entrepreneurs, rural poverty

Taken as a whole, rural areas in England are more entrepreneurial and generate higher levels of business creation per head of population than all Inner London. The survival rate of most new rural businesses is high, with a lower insolvency rate among rural businesses than those located in urban areas and nationally between April 2007 and December 2009. On many indicators, on aggregate, the performance of the rural economies is comparable to performance in urban areas.

However, the overall figures conceal the fact that in many rural areas average incomes for those who actually work there are much lower than the urban average. Statistics for rural incomes do not usually show this, since they are artificially inflated by those residents who commute to work in better-paid jobs in

18 *State of the Countryside 2010*. CRC 119. Commission for Rural Communities, July 2010.  
<http://ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/sotc/sotc2010.pdf>

urban centres and wealthy residents who have retired to the countryside:

- People who are actually working in rural areas earn on average £1,674 each year less than the urban average.
- People working in the most urban areas have average annual incomes in excess of £7,000 more than those working in the most rural areas.
- In the most rural areas, 28% of jobs are low paid, compared with 18% in the most urban areas.<sup>19</sup>
- 22% of self-employed people in rural areas are in poverty, compared with 8% in urban areas.<sup>20</sup>

For many rural businesses, growth is stunted by a lack of appropriate premises and extremely limited scope for expanding or modernising existing premises. Planning policy has frequently failed to respond to appropriate rural economic activity, often as a result of the inflexibility of interpretation of national policy at a local level towards rural business growth, and often based on preconceptions about what is appropriately a 'rural' business type. If rural economies are held back, so are rural wages. The hopes and needs of rural communities for better jobs and housing, transport, services and leisure are similar to those of people in urban areas. Yet many in the countryside feel that government (national and local) does not fully understand the relationship between rural businesses (whether land based or not), rural life and the environment.

## Better support for rural economies

In order to better support rural economies and to build on the already solid base of business start-ups, and the disproportionate numbers of small and home-based businesses, a number of planning barriers must be overcome, and opportunities taken, as considered in the remainder of this section:

- To seize the potential presented by the shift to a low-carbon economy.

- To promote business in all rural communities and the wider countryside, subject to conditions.
- To protect and maintain a good supply of appropriate sites and premises for all kinds of businesses.
- To unlock the potential of re-using historic farm buildings.
- To encourage home-based businesses.
- To invest in extending high-quality broadband throughout rural communities.

## Low-carbon economy

**We must seize the potential presented by the shift to a low-carbon economy to build a thriving new rural economy around local food, sustainable energy, and information technology.**

Unlocking the opportunities of the low-carbon economy must be a priority for the new Government. Renewable energy potential in the countryside, low-carbon farming and local food, and local employment rather than commuting – all of these are essential to meet the national challenge of tackling environmental constraints and climate change, as well as developing far more resilient and flexible rural economies.

There are massive opportunities for the UK to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions and contribute to tackling global climate change in the countryside. Currently rural dwellers find themselves having more carbon-intensive lifestyles than their urban dwelling counterparts.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, a strong tradition of self-help, community action and business entrepreneurship provides a unique rural advantage in tackling climate change. A growing number of villages and rural towns are at the leading edge of engaging the whole community in low-carbon activity, focusing on sustaining livelihoods and community spirit over the long term.

It is also in the countryside that the enormous potential for low- and zero-carbon energy solutions mainly

19 Bullets points 1-3: Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE). Office for National Statistics, 2006. Analysed by Institute for Public Policy Research for *Working out of Poverty*. IPPR, 2008 – cited in *England's Rural Areas: Steps to release their economic potential – Advice from the Rural Advocate to the Prime Minister*. 2008, p.22. [www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/crc67\\_englands\\_rural\\_areas1.pdf](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/crc67_englands_rural_areas1.pdf)

20 *Rural Economies: Stepping stones to healthier futures*. Countryside Agency, 2003 – cited in *Rural Strategy 2004*. Defra, 2004, p.65

21 D. Satterthwaite: 'Cities' contribution to global warming: notes on the allocation of greenhouse gas emissions'. *Environment & Urbanization*, 2008, Vol. 20, No.2, 539-49

resides. Land-based businesses will make a substantial contribution to the mitigation of climate change by supplying renewable energy, extracting energy from agricultural and forestry co-products, harnessing hydro power, and growing specialist crops for fuel.

Here too rests the potential for much lower carbon food solutions, such as local food, low-input farming (where effective), upstream management of inputs into water to reduce pollution, and better management of flood risks by harnessing nature.

Food chain emissions, other than from land use change, contribute approximately 20% of UK emissions, with meat and dairy products responsible for 50% of food chain emissions. Including emissions from land use change, in the UK and from land overseas producing food for UK consumption, increases the food chain's total emission to 30% of all UK carbon emissions. Low-carbon farming and renewables offer the largest potential positive contribution by farms and estates to the mitigation of climate change, by enabling other sectors to reduce their emissions. Similarly, the use of

anaerobic digestion to manage farm by-products (such as slurries) and other wastes, not only to reduce carbon dioxide emissions on farm, but also to displace the carbon dioxide burden of bought-in artificial fertilizer, offers a win-win way forward.

Furthermore, it is suggested that forest expansion towards 25% land cover, with an associated drive to use the renewable forest products to substitute for construction materials and fossil fuels, could provide approximately 10% of the emissions reduction required to meet Government targets for emissions reduction by 2050.

One of the most effective ways to engage people from all walks of rural life in all these opportunities is through shared and co-operative ownership and investment, giving everyone a stake, regardless of income or standing. An example is community-owned local generation/recycling/heating initiatives. As yet, however, the communities themselves gain little but costs from much of the move to low-carbon economies. The benefits of sustainable energy production in the

### Case study Centre for Renewable Energy, East Midlands

In its latest project, the Centre for Renewable Energy (CORE) aims to tap into the demand for expertise and the need for companies to specialise in developing green technologies, sourcing materials and selling equipment. This is particularly important in the current climate, with increasing Government pressure on extending and expanding renewable energy sources and technologies.

The CORE facility is now a showcase for renewable energy technologies. It provides expert advice to potential customers and offers managed workspace for businesses operating in the sector. Potential customers can see the technologies in action because they are incorporated into the fabric of the buildings. Biomass heating, ground and air source heat pumps, rainwater harvesting, a wind turbine, electricity-generating photovoltaics and solar panels are some of the sustainable energy resources that will be integrated into the carbon-neutral development. The overall aim is for the building to manufacture more heat, cooling, electricity and power through green technologies than it uses during its day-to-day operation. This is achieved by utilising carbon-neutral renewable energy products which are set to generate enough electricity and heat to supply the wider community.

CORE is acknowledged as an excellent example of how to bring better-quality jobs to the countryside in a sympathetic, sustainable and economic manner. It is anticipated that CORE will create 21 new jobs over the next four years as emerging renewable businesses take the opportunity to move into the shared office area and work collectively to maximise their commercial potential.





countryside are rarely transferred to local people, as lower energy costs or a community share of the income are not made available to them.

**One in three rural households do not have a mains gas connection and are reliant on heating oil, liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) or solid fuel for their heating. Not having a mains gas connection has a significant impact on the prevalence of fuel poverty: 23% of all households that have no mains gas connection are living in fuel poverty (compared with 12% of all households that have a mains gas connection).**

The shift towards market-based mechanisms such as Feed-In Tariffs<sup>22</sup> and Renewable Heat Incentives<sup>23</sup> is welcome and will boost investment by many rural businesses and households with access to capital. But unless attention is invested into finding ways of opening up these markets to the vast majority of rural householders and communities, the potential to mainstream low-carbon activity will not be realised, and it will remain a niche activity for the wealthy.

A central point of advice, training and capacity-building on the range of rural community ownership models and community interest companies would turn untapped interest into tangible returns. As rural community leaders, Local Authorities and Parish Councils have a key role to play in joining up and communicating climate change policy and opportunities from central government to the grassroots. Using local powers to raise finance and access cheaper capital for re-investment in local low-carbon activity that the whole community benefits from should be seen a central role for Councils. Policies that encourage low-carbon investment in rural community assets and local energy and fuel networks coupled with strong local leadership from Parish and Town Councils will enable every rural community to realise long-term sustainable benefits from climate change action.

National policies which enable local Councils and rural communities to unlock the potential of our countryside to help meet the challenge of climate change, and in so doing help rural communities build their own environmental, economic and social sustainability, are massively overdue. Such an approach needs to start by enabling rural communities to benefit from the changes we all need to make.

#### Recommendation 10

**New national policy on renewable energy should steer local plans to permit small-scale renewable energy developments in the countryside unless there are unacceptable adverse impacts on other national and local planning objectives.**

#### Recommendation 11

**We welcome the Government's proposals for a 'Green Deal' to finance and deliver energy efficiency improvements to existing housing. The detailed design of this programme needs to take into account that costs will be higher where housing is less concentrated, and that in some rural areas high-cost building types (for example solid wall) predominate. Government should carefully test the viability of wholly privately financed models in rural areas, and ensure any necessary top-up via supplier obligation funding. It should also ensure that the franchising arrangements for advisers and suppliers do not exclude smaller businesses.**

#### Our commitment

**The RTPI, the TCPA and the LG Group commit to work together with other relevant bodies on information and advice for local authorities seeking to encourage small-scale renewable energy generation in rural areas, to help them assess properly local impact and viability through their planning and other functions.**

#### Promoting rural business

**We must promote business in all rural communities and the wider countryside, subject to acceptable local impacts and encouraging a sustainable local economy.**

Promoting diverse rural economic development that is appropriate in scale and impact is vital to building a more sustainable future for both rural communities and the nation. Policy must both meet needs and **build sustainability in every community** to encourage and maintain local employment opportunities and rising incomes, and should not focus only on larger urban centres or even market towns.

22 Feed-in Tariffs (FITs) became available in Great Britain on 1 April 2010. Under this scheme energy suppliers make regular payments to householders and communities who generate their own electricity from renewable or low-carbon sources

23 The Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) will provide financial support for those who install renewable heating which qualifies for support under the scheme

Land-based activities such as agriculture, and woodland/forestry continue to underpin the management of our countryside, and continue to shape the evolution of the historic landscape, which in future will include significant land use change in response to global demands for food/energy/environmental security. New farm buildings will be needed to meet modern agricultural practices.

'Land-based' activities are a vital part of our rural economies and the maintenance of the countryside. Indeed, in the face of climate change they are of more critical importance than ever – we have already discussed how local food production and sustainable energy options available in the countryside are key elements in plans to cut carbon dioxide emissions. We need a progressive approach to these activities to promote sustainable solutions that are important both to rural communities and to meet the wider challenge of tackling climate change.

While agriculture retains a national policy profile in terms of food production, its economic profile has been gradually declining, with job losses and restructuring leading land managers to find new uses for farm assets, usually in the form of office space and light industrial workshops. Indeed, the countryside not only grows food but it also provides opportunities for sport and recreation. These types of activity are not necessarily 'traditional', but they bring income into the countryside, as well as helping to develop interest and understanding.

But this does not mean that land-based employment is the only kind of economic development that should be located in rural communities. The narrow interpretation of planning policy which prevents smaller rural villages from meeting their affordable housing needs too often applies equally to economic development. Often local people say that the interpretation and implementation of national planning policy at local level gives precedence to development in larger 'key' centres and restricts rural development elsewhere – even development which is small scale, low impact and fosters local employment opportunities.

A significant challenge to the growth of rural economies is that current policy focuses on city-regions as the engines of economic growth and regeneration. The unintended consequence may be leaving huge areas of rural England 'off the map'. If the new Government is serious about localism, it is important

this does not replace a national prescription with one based only on a focus on larger urban communities as the employment hubs for scattered rural communities. Commuting into town is not the most sustainable employment solution for rural communities – we need to return to seeing every community as its own hub for a high proportion of services and employment.

The focus of current rural planning policies on larger settlements as 'hubs' fails to understand that large tracts of England's countryside are characterised by a historic and present-day pattern of dispersed settlements based on hamlets and farmsteads, rather than large villages. We believe that, in some circumstances, reinforcing the historic pattern through small-scale development at the hamlet/ farmstead level is more appropriate and potentially more sustainable than concentrating development and services in atypically large settlements. English Heritage's work with the High Weald AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) is a national exemplar of good practice,<sup>24</sup> as is the exemplar at Hathersage village in the Peak District National Park (see the case study box on the facing page).

Promoting sustainable economic development in rural areas can potentially reduce energy use and emissions by allowing people to live and work in the same locality, much as they would in the city. It is important to recognise that encouraging an architect or IT expert in the village to take on a local secretary or a local graduate to grow the business is as valid a form of rural employment today as adding value to local food production. Large office developments are for the town – but two or three small office units, perhaps where a garage used to be, or incorporated into a community-led affordable housing scheme, may be exactly what the village needs to retain and enhance local employment opportunities.

### Recommendation 12

**Where they have significant rural territory, Local Enterprise Partnerships should ensure that they have a strong rural voice, and specific strategies and programmes for enterprise and employment in rural areas. These strategies should carefully consider in particular how rural economies function and can be sustained, while protecting the character of the countryside.**

24 *Historic Farmsteads and Landscape Character in High Weald*. Forum Heritage Services for the High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee and English Heritage, 2008. <http://www.highweald.org/home/research.html> and <http://www.highweald.org/look-after/property-management/historic-farmsteads.html>



### Case study

## Hathersage Hall Business Centre, Derbyshire



Hathersage Hall Business Centre is bringing prominent knowledge-based businesses from Sheffield and Manchester into the village of Hathersage, which lies within the Peak District National Park and is also a Conservation Area. The 18th century, Grade II listed, family owned farm complex was developed into state-of-the-art offices in 2007. The 12,500 square foot complex is the first development within the confines of the Peak District National Park to combine listed buildings and new structures to create a high-quality commercial property hub dedicated to knowledge-based businesses – including those in the legal, architectural, design, digital, finance and marketing sectors. The Business Centre comprises six sensitively restored Grade II listed farm buildings, complemented by two new-build properties to create 13 offices in a variety of sizes, including new-build dedicated ‘incubator’ units for fledgling companies.

### Recommendation 13

**Government should consult on how any redesigned business support services can best meet the needs of businesses located in rural areas (whether land based or not) who may have different advice requirements and access to support from those based in urban areas.**

### Our commitment

**The CLA and the LG Group commit to work together with other relevant bodies on information and advice which will encourage the adoption of innovative and distinctly rural approaches to employment and enterprise in rural areas, using Councils’ new freedom from central planning prescription and other mechanisms.**

### Supply of business sites and premises

We should protect and maintain a good supply of appropriate sites and premises for all kinds of businesses. Such action should include a sensitive but flexible approach to the conversion of farm buildings and farm diversification; business expansion through extensions to existing buildings and through more flexible planning and a review of the tax regime in relation to work-based home extensions and small-scale premises; and better support for existing business to expand within the community.

Ensuring a good supply of sites and premises is an essential element in building more sustainable rural economies and better-paid employment. Growth is a

challenge for any business. But in rural areas this challenge is amplified by a lack of suitable business premises, and exacerbated by the fact that employment land reviews focusing on rural employment have not been undertaken or updated for a long time, so the planning authority evidence to support rural employment sites simply does not exist. There are frequently no small or 'incubator' business premises available for start-ups to step in to. Businesses wishing to grow in their existing site, or create a new premises, may also fall foul of too narrow a view of what is appropriate business for the countryside. Businesses rooted in local communities may either have to limit growth or move away. Either way, the local community loses the opportunity for local employment growth, and may lose local employment altogether.

Redundant rural business premises of all types – including heritage/listed buildings, or buildings in the curtilage of listed buildings, not just unused farm buildings – should be seen as an opportunity to provide modern premises suitable for the growth of new kinds of local employment.<sup>25</sup> The conversion of business premises to housing should be resisted where there is not appropriate alternative employment space available in the community to sustain and grow local employment. Spare office space in a market town is not in itself an indication that space is not needed to meet local employment needs. However, a proper assessment should be made of the supply and demand for all types of potential use for these kinds of buildings – see Recommendation 15 below.

Planning policy and national, regional and local priorities need to reflect the proper balance between the need for housing and employment space in rural communities. Re-use and conversion of existing buildings can provide new premises for rural enterprises, creating new and often much needed employment space, ensuring the viability of existing rural business and supporting farm diversification. But with appropriate scale and design, all sorts of business premises can be accommodated in rural communities – new as well as restored, for high-tech and office uses as well as for food and more traditional rural enterprises.

Planning Policy Statement 4: *Planning for Sustainable Economic Growth* picked up many of the recommendations of the Taylor Review in this respect – but the message that even the smallest rural communities can build their environmental, social and

economic sustainability by encouraging high-quality local employment opportunities of an appropriate scale and type needs to be reinforced to planners at local level. The narrow interpretation of 'sustainability' must become a thing of the past as it applies to economic development and jobs in rural areas.

### Recommendation 14

**Local government should adopt clear policies to promote, protect and maintain a good supply of appropriate sites and premises for all kinds of businesses in smaller rural communities (including sparsely populated and peripheral areas) – adopting a sensitive but flexible approach to the conversion of farm buildings and farm diversification; and better support for existing business to expand within the community through extensions to existing buildings and new build. Where the potential local impact has been shown to not threaten the quality of rural places or the architectural and/or historic merits of buildings, and subject to conformity with other local planning policies, conversion or building of small-scale business premises in rural areas should be promoted, and where there is oversupply conversion to residential use should also be sympathetically considered.**

### Unlocking the potential of re-using historic farm buildings

We have stated above that where business space is limited it will be important to protect sites against residential redevelopment in order to preserve them as potential workspaces. However, in many other areas the declining state of the building stock and its ubiquity means that the supply of buildings will far exceed possible demand for business use, even with a more responsive planning system. There, a mixed approach is required which adapts buildings for both residential and business development according to their character and capacity for change. Interestingly, in this regard, English Heritage research demonstrates that in some remote rural areas (for example, the Bowland Fringe and Pendle Hills) converted farm buildings already represent 5% of the entire dwelling stock – an important contribution when supply is restricted. This capacity of existing traditional farm and other agriculture-related buildings to provide affordable housing, exemplified by

<sup>25</sup> *Living Buildings in a Living Landscape: Finding a future for traditional farm buildings*. English Heritage and the Countryside Agency, 2006. [www.helm.org.uk/upload/pdf/Living-Buildings-Long-Version.pdf](http://www.helm.org.uk/upload/pdf/Living-Buildings-Long-Version.pdf); and *Conversion of Traditional Farm Buildings: A guide to good practice*. English Heritage 2006. [www.helm.org.uk/upload/pdf/Traditional-Farm1.pdf](http://www.helm.org.uk/upload/pdf/Traditional-Farm1.pdf)

the South Lakeland 'Home on the Farm' initiative, has recently been recognised in the new Coalition Government's programme of commitments.

### Recommendation 15

**Local Authorities and Local Enterprise Partnerships should consider strategic reviews of the redundant traditional farm building stock in their areas in order to develop evidence-based planning policies for its adaptive re-use for business or housing purposes.**

### Home-based businesses

**Home-based businesses are much more common in rural areas than in urban areas, are already the driving force in many rural economies, and are fast growing in number.** In the most rural areas more than one in three people now work from home. Nationally, the proportion of the workforce working mainly from home doubled between the last two Censuses (1991 and 2001) to around one in ten.<sup>26</sup> In all types of rural area, home-based work is significantly more common than in urban areas: 17% of working rural residents work from home, and in the most rural areas (sparse hamlets and isolated dwellings) this figure is 31%, compared with 8% of urban-based residents.<sup>27</sup> These figures will have grown significantly since the 2001 Census.

There are benefits for the home-based worker or small business in terms of lower cost of combined workspace and home, a reduction in time lost commuting, increased business security, and improved work-life balance. Home-based work has intrinsic benefits for sustainable development too. It encourages less use of the car, and requires less infrastructure, fewer buildings, and less energy use (since space and heat are shared with the home). Small-scale local employment, even when adjacent to the home rather than in it, encourages walking to work. The key difference in travel-to-work patterns is that rural residents are more likely to commute under 1 kilometre (35.8% rural compared with 21.5% urban working residents), while the most common commute distance for urban residents was 1-5 kilometres. The proportions commuting longer distances were similar for both rural and urban residents.<sup>28</sup>

So ensuring an appropriate supply of land and workspace for small and home-based businesses, and thus encouraging local employment in rural villages, can increase the sustainability of rural communities. The business may stimulate the local economy by using other local businesses – the store, the Post Office – and increase the prosperity of a neighbourhood. Purely residential areas tend to be deserted during the day, as employment areas are at night. Both are vulnerable to crime when empty. Properties inhabited for the dual functions of dwelling and workplace tend to be occupied across the 24-hour period, reducing this vulnerability and building community cohesion.

Yet for home-based enterprise, business expansion can be difficult owing to few expansion opportunities, and therefore can often mean one of two options: either employing someone at the kitchen table, or re-locating into town. Both options – to work in cramped or unsuitable space, or to commute elsewhere – can be limiting factors for growth. Survey evidence suggests that for many home-based businesses, a poor working environment hampers business growth.<sup>29</sup> Put simply, why take on staff if there is nowhere to put them, and the business makes viable a comfortable lifestyle, without the need for growth?

Yet Local Planning Authorities could be more ready to grant approval to proposals for extra workspace. There is no obvious reason for taking a less positive approach in principle to the creation of a room for use as a workspace than for family use. Of course environmental impacts like noise need to be sensibly considered and possibly conditions imposed accordingly, but in the IT era many professional businesses generate little more noise than the sound of a keyboard, and fewer visitors than a family home. The new Government should introduce a much more supportive approach to workspace extensions to the home specifically designed to encourage appropriate local business growth.

Similarly, if a home-based solution may not be viable for the business to grow, a community-based solution should be available. Yet while it is easy enough to find a small office in most urban communities, in most villages very few if any such premises exist, and older redundant premises are far more likely to be turned into

26 1991 and 2001 Censuses. Office for National Statistics – cited in T. Dwelly *et al.*: *Tomorrow's Property Today*. Flexibility, 2008, p.2

27 2001 Census. Office for National Statistics

28 *Living Working Countryside*. The Taylor Review of Rural Economy and Affordable Housing. Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008. [www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/livingworkingcountryside](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/livingworkingcountryside)

29 Shropshire Enterprise Partnership Limited submission to the Taylor Review – a survey of 400 home-based entrepreneurs found that 74% cited a 'lack of custom built workspace in my home' as hampering business growth

housing than workspaces. Villages may get or have workshop-style sheds; they more rarely get or have high-quality office spaces. The assumptions that rural development is centred on land-based industries, and office needs are catered for by spare capacity in the town, encourages unsustainable commutes and constrains sustainable rural economic growth.

Planning is not the only issue. The tax system from capital gains to business rates deters home-based solutions. There is strong evidence that this not only constricts growth, but encourages an unofficial 'black' economy for home-working. The new Government should urgently review perverse disincentives in the tax system to home-based work and especially employment creation. A *de minimis* percentage of the home used for business before business rates and capital gains tax liabilities occur, for example, might encourage employment growth in rural areas at little or no cost.

Better support for home-based business, especially in making the first step into employing local staff and moving when necessary to local external premises, would transform economic opportunities for local people in many small rural communities, providing new highly sustainable local employment.

### Recommendation 16

**The new Government should ensure that national planning policy and guidance does not prevent Local Authorities from introducing a much more supportive approach to workspace alterations or extensions to the home to encourage appropriate local business growth, by making appropriate changes to Part 1 of the General Permitted Development Order.**

### Recommendation 17

**The Government should conduct a review of the tax regime in relation to work-based home extensions and small-scale premises to remove perverse disincentives in the tax system to home-based work and especially employment creation. For example, to encourage employment creation a *de minimis* percentage of the home used for business could be introduced before business rates and capital gains tax liabilities occur.**

### Our commitment

**The RTPI, the TCPA and the LG Group will work together to explore model Local Development Orders which could remove the need for formal change of use, alteration or extension planning permissions for small-scale live-work type developments. These models should outline clearly innovative rural best practice for delivering required rural homes and workplaces while not undermining rural character.**

### High-quality broadband

We must invest in extending high-quality broadband throughout rural communities, which is a prerequisite for maintaining and growing the rural economy, as well as an increasingly essential part of the social, educational and service infrastructure.

Gradually extending accessibility to broadband opens up unprecedented opportunities which many of those living in rural communities are taking advantage of. Growth in the proportion of knowledge-intensive business services between 1998 and 2005 – largely reliant on ICT infrastructure – has increased by 46% in rural areas compared with 21% in urban areas.<sup>30</sup> Cottage industries produce and sell everything from ethical clothing to luxury food products. Business formation is disproportionately high in rural England. There are now 556 businesses per 10,000 population in rural districts, compared with 443 in urban districts (represented by VAT registration); while in 2009 there were 13.9 small business start-ups per 1,000 population in all rural areas, compared with 12.7 per 1,000 population in urban areas.<sup>31</sup>

However, recent research also suggests that the speed of internet connection and service is often much slower in rural areas than in urban ones, because existing broadband technology is less efficient in sparsely populated areas.<sup>32</sup> **In a time of recession, improving the business environment by rolling out high-speed broadband to all rural communities would help small rural businesses to make a vital contribution to the national economy – and bring a range of public services into businesses and homes at the same time.**

30 Annual Business Inquiry, Workplace Analysis. Office for National Statistics (from Nomis), 2007

31 *State of the Countryside 2010*. CRC 119. Commission for Rural Communities, July 2010.  
<http://ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/sotc/sotc2010.pdf>

32 Survey of more than 138,000 web connections across the UK by Thinkbroadband.com, June 2008

We have already said that home-based working is twice as common in rural areas as in urban areas, and is a sustainable use of property that can help both to grow the local economy and facilitate the low-carbon agenda. Existing housing and lack of broadband infrastructure often mitigates against 'live-work' options, holding back rural start-up enterprise and investment.

The *Digital Britain*<sup>33</sup> report also highlighted that enhanced delivery of public services requires universal access take-up within the home. The UK has the highest number of public services available online – some 89%, compared with around 70% in France and Germany. This will be particularly pertinent to those on lower incomes, older people, or those remote from the physical distribution points for public service and other currently excluded communities and groups.

The Government has decided to abandon the broadband levy and rely on private investment in next generation broadband services. Part of the solution may be through enabling small communities to take action on broadband themselves. The potential for initiatives that can be generated and implemented by the community itself is already being explored nationally, and is likely to be widely supported by rural communities since it targets individuals, supports local economic development, and offers solutions to creating a range of 'virtual' public services. The new Government's commitment to rural broadband may be enabled faster and more effectively through community-led next generation broadband than through gradual upgrade of existing services.

Increasing access to high-speed connectivity services (such as 'superfast broadband') for households, business and communities in poorly served areas across the UK is a key policy focus for the Coalition Government. This includes the continuation of a Universal Service Commitment of 2 Mbps (2 megabits per second), first launched in the *Digital Britain* report in 2009, to bring connectivity to those areas still without a basic level of broadband access – primarily rural areas. The Government is making money available from the under-spend of the TV Digital Switchover Help Scheme to try to address this problem, and is currently developing suitable commercial and delivery models. The first step towards increasing the penetration of high-speed connectivity will be the running of three market testing projects in rural areas. The information from these projects, in addition to

initiatives that are already going on across the country, will be used to better target possible Government intervention and investment in 'superfast broadband' in the future. The growth of new technology opens an unprecedented opportunity to help rural business deliver far more for the economy locally and nationally, rejuvenate rural communities, and so increase their environmental, social and economic sustainability. But we need to deliver the infrastructure, premises options and support to unlock this potential.

#### Recommendation 18

**The Government proposals on broadband should encourage the most appropriate means by which communities can obtain high-speed broadband access, whether through commercial supply or community-led initiatives. In building cost-benefit models of projects to secure better broadband speeds, partners should consider the potential savings to public service delivery costs that can result from e-delivery.**

33 *Digital Britain*. Final Report. Department for Culture, Media and Sport, June 2009



# Challenge 3

## Delivering great rural services

### What we said in our prospectus:

*'Every healthy community needs its services: including transport, education, social support and financial access. But it's extremely unlikely – as experience proves – that the form of such services demanded by large, urban communities will be equally satisfactory for those in the countryside. Or it may be that those services designed for urban use are simply too expensive for smaller rural communities. As a result, and all too often, Governments simply cut them out.'*

*'That's why it's essential that in future rural services are far better tailored to local needs – and that is best done when they are determined not by remote legislators but by the communities they are there to serve. The result, in many cases, will be different ways of delivering rural services better suited to the needs of those communities, combined with a welcome decrease in cost.'*

A review of rural service provision over the last two decades makes depressing reading – especially to the approximately 10 million people (over 19% of England's population) who live there. Rural areas often lack the very basic services enjoyed by their urban counterparts, and small towns lack some of the basic infrastructure to serve the needs of their residents and those living in the surrounding rural hinterland.

Local services are fundamentally important:

- They contribute significantly to the vitality of place.
- They underpin sustainable mixed communities.
- It is the most vulnerable who are hardest hit by the withdrawal of local services.
- Local businesses need services too – so services are essential for the economic prosperity of rural areas.

- Local services generate local jobs. Local people employed locally spend more in the local area, thereby supporting the local economy.
- They contribute to reducing travel and thereby to carbon dioxide reduction targets.

Only if people in rural communities have ready access to local schools, local jobs, local shops and pubs and homes which are affordable will they and their children thrive, and will the nation meet its environmental and economic needs.

Yet the trend across the whole range of services, in both rural areas and small towns serving a wider rural hinterland, has been one of closure, affecting both public and private services, even before the credit crunch and the need to rein in public spending. The fastest closure rates are generally among the private sector. Rural shops are closing at the rate of 400 to 500 per year, hit by a combination of rising costs, lack of credit, and falling margins. Village pubs are being closed at an unprecedented rate, and Post Offices remain under extreme threat.<sup>34</sup> For public services, the threat is services becoming ever more remote, as smaller-scale – and per capita more expensive – delivery is cut back in the name of rationalisation and service quality.

The drivers of rural service closures include centralisation, specialisation, cost cutting, people accessing services near the workplace, and the changing population balance.

**Of course service closures are not unique to rural areas, and the need to find savings is now universal. But the impact will be greater time and again in rural communities – because, quite simply, the next nearest outlet is likely to be much further away and less accessible by public transport in rural rather than urban areas.**

The imbalance between urban and rural public service provision is already marked:<sup>35</sup>

34 *The Rural Services Manifesto 2010 and Beyond*. Rural Services Network, 2010. [www.rsnonline.org.uk/images/files/ruralservicesmanifesto2010.pdf](http://www.rsnonline.org.uk/images/files/ruralservicesmanifesto2010.pdf)

35 *State of the Countryside Update: Children and educational services*. CRC Web 43. Commission for Rural Communities, March 2010. [http://ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/CRC%20WEB43%20SOTC%20Update\\_TAGGED180310.pdf](http://ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/CRC%20WEB43%20SOTC%20Update_TAGGED180310.pdf)

- There are more than 3,000 SureStart Children's Centres in England. Of the 394 in rural areas, 314 are classified as town and fringe. Only 80 are in villages and hamlets, and, on average, these each have to provide for 2,500 children – more than double the average for urban centres.
  - 50% of homes in sparse areas have a SAP rating (Standard Assessment Procedure for energy efficiency) of below 30, compared with just 8% in urban areas. A SAP rating below 30 is classified as an extremely energy-inefficient home and a significant health hazard. Yet, for example, between 2000 and 2008 only 10% of Warm Front Grants were awarded in rural areas, increasing only slightly to 15% in 2008/2009.
  - At the end of June 2009, 40% of 16- to 24-year-olds in rural areas were unemployed (107,000) or economically inactive (267,000). Of the 573 Jobcentre Plus outlets in England, around 80 are in market towns with populations of more than 10,000, but only 23 in more rural areas. By 2007, 45% of the rural population lived more than 5 miles from a Jobcentre – up from 41% in 2000.<sup>36</sup>
  - In 2009/2010, 9% of the Department for Work and Pensions Growth Fund to improve the availability of appropriate affordable credit to those who are financially excluded and on low incomes went to those in relative poverty in rural areas – up from 6.8% by 2008/2009 measures.<sup>37</sup> In 2008/2009, 18% of rural households (compared with 23% of urban households) had an income of less than 60% of the median income after housing costs had been accounted for. This figure rises to 25% (one in four) of households when the most sparse rural areas of England are considered.
  - Almost 60% of urban areas are able to receive a cable-based broadband service – in villages and hamlets this drops to 1.5%.
- extent to which rural services have been able to meet local needs:
- Simplistic national targets are easiest and less costly to meet when the service providers focus on centres of population. There has been no requirement to achieve proportionate impact in rural areas. Central target-setting has tended to create a lack of joined-up thinking about the issues and has led to 'service silos'.
  - Funding formulae use urban measures as proxies for budgeting, and fail to take proper account of the additional costs faced by those providing essential services across rural areas.
  - The body of nationally determined rules and regulations about public service delivery may directly obstruct innovative approaches to providing services affordably and effectively in rural areas, or make public service managers risk-averse about experimenting.
  - Policy-makers tend to consider deprivation primarily as an urban issue and ignore the fact that there are pockets of deprivation in rural areas and small towns. These pockets of deprivation are often masked in statistical terms – for instance using net income in rural areas includes wealthy commuters and means that many consider rural areas and rural residents to be affluent.
  - There are other issues with national data and local data. For example, small towns tend to be hidden in the statistics. There is currently no agreed Government method for statistically separating market towns from other urban areas. Under the 2005 ONS rural/urban definition, settlements with a population over 10,000 are classified as 'urban'. This includes many larger market towns such as Chard, Ilfracombe, Berwick-upon-Tweed and Ilkley. This means that it is less likely for trends in market towns to be captured, and therefore more likely that their special needs are overlooked. This needs to be addressed. There is also a need to improve data at the local level as a basis for determining solutions using community-led planning.

## Inappropriate urban-biased policy

The application (by policy-makers nationally and regionally) of inappropriate policy and practice, designed for use in urban areas, has undermined the

36 *Rural Advocate Report 2010*. CRC 118. Commission for Rural Communities, March 2010. [www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/CRC118-rural-advocate-report.pdf](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/files/CRC118-rural-advocate-report.pdf)

37 Households Below Average Income (HBAI). Department for Work and Pensions, 2009. <http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=hbai>

- Universal Service Obligations on core services including utilities, telecommunications and Royal Mail are vital to sparse rural communities. There is a clear need for better regulation of private sector services such as telecommunications and utilities to ensure that such companies do not simply ‘cherry-pick’ urban areas.
- Public policy has been very much focused on service quality and choice. While this is desirable and important to rural people too, it misses the basic rural necessity of service accessibility: **having no accessible service means having no choice at all.**

There will always be a service hierarchy, with higher-level services. But that should not mean that rural needs are simply discounted. Take health, for example. Acute hospitals will be situated in more urban centres and larger market towns. But local service delivery via multi-use medical centres (local hospitals and GP surgeries) has a role to play in creating accessible local services and relieving pressure (post-operative care etc.) on acute services.

The public expenditure cuts which all public services face for many years to come will, without a change in direction and innovation in service delivery better suited to the needs of rural communities, only exacerbate an already untenable status quo. In contrast, **a government willing to let go of national models of delivery and support innovative local community solutions, integrated with public service provision, will find not only that better services which meet local needs are delivered, but that they can be provided at less cost than trying to use urban service models in a rural setting.**

### Recommendation 19

**Before finalising the Comprehensive Spending Review, the Government should review the proportionate impact in rural areas and take proper account of the additional costs faced by those providing essential services across rural areas.**

### Recommendation 20

**The Government and statutory bodies should recognise that the targeting of initiatives using large-area statistical data fails to recognise the existence of dispersed rural deprivation. When using geographical data of any kind, Government and public sector agencies should ensure that they have considered whether small-area data that is more reflective of the rural context exists, or can be obtained. This should then form the basis for the development of priorities and service delivery programmes in the area.**

### Recommendation 21

**Where the Government considers extending competition in core utilities, consideration should be given to what Universal Service Obligations are needed to ensure that companies do not ‘cherry-pick’ urban areas, with resulting reduced services or increased costs for dispersed rural communities.**

### Recommendation 22

**We welcome the Government commitment to scaling back inspection frameworks and activity, and reviewing regulatory systems like health and safety, provided they ensure that attention is given to ‘rural proofing’ proposals. The objectives should include helping public services and the third sector in rural areas be less unnecessarily risk-averse about innovative low-cost approaches to service delivery.**

## The ‘Big Society’ – a new dynamic for rural services

Given the importance of services, against the reality of current spending constraints and the clear evidence that current nationally directed solutions are failing rural communities, it is time for change.

The new Coalition Government’s commitment to the ‘Big Society’ in an era of relative austerity in public funding sets a clear rural challenge, yet provides clear rural opportunities. We need to achieve better rural services, at less cost. To do that we need to harness the power and understanding of local communities themselves to deliver their own tailored solutions. Rural areas have strengths upon which to build that new dynamic for local services.



Looking at the totality of all public spending in an area rather than by service (or service provider) presents new opportunities, as does participatory budgeting, which has been piloted successfully by several rural Councils. Rural areas possess strong communities and have a good track record in community engagement in local issues – including ‘community-led planning’. The work of Market Town Partnerships (including their rural hinterland) creates a good base and action plans to meet local needs. Many local rural service providers are innovating already, and often work in partnership to address issues of common concern.

All these are basic building blocks for a new dynamic for rural services better tailored to local needs – as determined by the communities they are serving and not by remote legislators – and delivering a welcome reduction in costs. Above all, this new dynamic must respect the fact that no two places are the same (thus requiring different patterns of local solutions) and that centrally prescribed performance targets are part of the problem, not the solution.

Where the community offers to fill the gap left by a withdrawn service with a lower level of support (a lunch club in place of a day care centre, community transport schemes to take people to service centres), investment may still be needed to support the community; the ‘Big Society’ needs practical as well as policy support to kick-start and maintain these replacement services.

**The new dynamic will need to focus on turning localism and total place into a rural reality, through five core principles: empowerment, social enterprise, hub and spoke delivery, community investment, and unlocking the potential of modern IT to deliver virtual service solutions.**

**Community empowerment means:**

- The involvement of local people in service planning and the identification of gaps in provision and in prioritisation – community-led planning in its widest sense. That requires that the gap between the statutory and voluntary sectors be bridged in terms of their involvement in the processes and the local determination and delivery of local outcomes.

- Community connectors – people in a community who are in regular contact with perhaps the more vulnerable and those less likely to gain access to particular services and who act to alert services to need. For example, postmen or shopkeepers, who are in contact with residents, can act as levers to alert providers about services required, such as healthcare/financial advice/ police support etc. The Village Agents model, originally set up in Gloucestershire, whereby clusters of communities are served by an Agent paid to keep in touch with the community and individual vulnerable residents, has been acknowledged as national good practice and is now being replicated elsewhere.<sup>38</sup>
- Service delegation/devolutions from principal Councils to Parish/Town Councils where this makes sense to the community, and the use of Local Development Plan processes to seek the retention of local service outlets.
- Encouraging community-run enterprises/services – the Government’s proposals on the ‘Community Right to Bid’ need to encompass both ‘like for like’ services under the commissioning route and support for community-led initiatives that extend the reach of public services or provide partial solutions to retaining local provision.
- The Government’s proposals on the ‘Community Right to Buy’<sup>39</sup> directly relate to the development of community-owned shops, pubs and other private sector retail outlets. Community-led planning has been shown to be effective in generating the necessary support to save facilities, and the Plunkett Foundation<sup>40</sup> provides the specialist expertise to bring the project to fruition. But policy mechanisms to support the Community Right to Buy, potentially through the planning system, need to allow sufficient time for community enterprises to develop.
- A Government-backed Post Office Bank, providing as full a range of financial services as possible, providing local banking services for small businesses and vulnerable people while also supporting a sustainable rural Post Office network.

38 See [www.grcc.org.uk/our\\_work/village\\_agents](http://www.grcc.org.uk/our_work/village_agents)

39 The ‘Community Right to Buy’ is a Big Society manifesto commitment which will allow communities to save an existing service outlet that they consider is essential to local community life

40 See [www.plunkett.co.uk/](http://www.plunkett.co.uk/)

### Community hubs and spokes means:

- Shared or multi-purpose service outlets – perhaps based on Council one-stop shops, but with access to services in other locations such as village halls and shops using new technologies.
- The use of more outreach and mobile services – taking the service to (or closer to) the end user, and resourcing this by involving more than one service. Good examples exist of partnerships between local government and police, fire and health services providing advice across all sectors and identifying need where necessary.
- There are over 9,000 community-owned halls in rural communities, many of which already provide a base for regular outreach and advice services. Wiring up village halls can also provide access to online services and reduce the digital divide in rural communities. There is a similar potential role for many church buildings – according to English Heritage, 13% of rural places of worship are at risk.<sup>41</sup>
- Rural/market towns should be identified and supported as service centres for their rural hinterland.

### Community investment means:

- Public service funding formulae must recognise the rural service delivery costs associated with population dispersal and settlement patterns.
- Wherever possible, Government investment should be linked to building the capacity of communities to design and mesh together their own solutions, using local knowledge and local action to deliver tailored solutions that maximise value and minimise cost.

### Virtual community means:

- Using broadband/digital TV/mobile phone networks to access services such as tele-health, e-learning, virtual colleges, access to Jobcentre Plus services etc. – but the existing rural broadband gap (including speed and reliability of service) needs to be bridged first.

### Recommendation 23

**The Government's proposals on the 'Community Right to Bid' need to encompass two alternative approaches, so that appropriate solutions can meet local circumstances through 'like for like' services via commissioning, or through community-led initiatives that extend the reach of public services or provide partial solutions to retaining local provision, particularly where the service would otherwise lack viability.**

### Recommendation 23a

**The Government's proposals on the 'Community Right to Buy' should build on the mechanisms already in place to support community enterprise replacement of key retail services, ensuring that resulting policies recognise the time taken to develop community enterprises.**

### Recommendation 24

**The Government should work with the Post Office to achieve a full a range of financial services through rural Post Office branches, providing local banking services for small businesses and vulnerable people, and supporting a sustainable rural Post Office network.**

### Recommendation 25

**Public service providers should consider options for shared or multi-purpose service outlets, outreach and mobile services, before instituting cuts to services. These can provide more cost-effective options – including delivery through public and private community facilities, from village halls to Post Offices and pubs.**

### Recommendation 26

**Government proposals to work with the private sector to develop IT infrastructure should take account of the opportunities to improve access and reduce the cost of providing public services in rural communities through services such as tele-health, e-learning, virtual colleges, and access to Jobcentre Plus services etc., including the benefits of wiring up community facilities like village halls as a first step.**

<sup>41</sup> *Caring for Places of Worship*. English Heritage, 2010. [www.english-heritage.org.uk/protecting/heritage-at-risk/caring-for-places-of-worship/](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/protecting/heritage-at-risk/caring-for-places-of-worship/)

## Rural transport

Transport is a good example of an essential rural service not addressed by urban models of delivery. The adequate provision of rural public transport is viewed as a core issue by rural communities and service providers alike, all the more important for its role in connecting rural people with their homes, workplaces and other services. The last government made significant investment in rural public transport – but to little effect. In a recent survey public transport was the policy area that most rural residents felt was a priority for Government action, 28% of respondents placing it in their top four areas for action.<sup>42</sup>

Rural transport raises three core challenges for public policy-makers:

- The inability of public transport to adequately serve a wider range of destinations – combined with rising fares, the loss of local facilities such as Post Offices, shops and health centres, and the growing reliance on the private vehicle – has caused serious problems for those **without access to private transport**, especially the old, the young, and the housebound. These problems have been well documented. Given a growing but ageing rural population, and the prospect of costlier fuel and/or carbon rationing, the transport needs of those without access to private cars are likely to increase rather than decline.
- The rural transport problem goes beyond the specific needs of disadvantaged groups. Despite widespread calls for better integration of public transport, rural areas are generally poorly connected to wider regional and national public transport networks, such as train and express bus services. This is partly because rural areas are not included in **strategic planning** exercises at regional or national levels. They are perceived to be marginal to the needs or viability of major transport proposals.
- The challenge to **reduce carbon dioxide emissions** in order to help mitigate climate change. Transport is a major producer of carbon dioxide, and rural areas are perceived – rightly or wrongly – to be a leading culprit. There is no doubt that improved public transport could help to reduce these carbon dioxide emissions, but it

needs to be delivered in affordable and therefore often innovative ways.

Policy and funding need to move on from urban transport models, and look to innovative solutions for tailoring public transport to rural needs. Where public transport, in any form, fails to meet needs, community-based solutions should be supported to fill the gap. These can be formal community transport, such as car pools and minibus provision, or less formal schemes, such as organised good neighbour and car-sharing.

Alongside specific **sectoral services**, such as school buses, hospital transport, and social services, there is a track record of success in developing local **community-based transport services**, to meet both the specific needs of disadvantaged groups within rural communities, and the wider needs of the rural community as a whole. Many of these ‘bottom-up’ schemes serve to fill the gaps left by the withdrawal of commercial services, increasingly drawing upon social enterprise models of organisation and financing.

An excellent example of service innovation can be found in Lincolnshire, which has regular traditional buses running on inter-urban routes (called InterConnect), then a pre-booked service (called CallConnect) filling the gaps by running from pre-set pick-up points in outlying villages. CallConnect will take people to other local pick-up/set-down points, or (for longer journeys) it will take them to meet an InterConnect service or to a local rail station. The third layer of this transport system is a Dial-a-Ride service which offers door-to-door provision for those with mobility problems who cannot manage CallConnect. However initiatives like this face serious challenges, including securing continuous funding, finding and retaining volunteer drivers, and restrictive legislation.

### Recommendation 27

**Local strategic transport planning should take greater account of access issues for dispersed rural communities, to ensure that they are effectively linked to regional and national road and rail networks. Subsidy for local public transport in rural areas should be prioritised towards innovative programmes that support community solutions where these can offer less costly solutions than traditional public transport offers better suited to urban centres.**

<sup>42</sup> *Rural Insights Residents Survey 2009*. Research Report. Commission for Rural Communities and Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, March 2010. <http://ruralcommunities.gov.uk/2010/03/10/rural-insights-resident-survey-2009/>

# Challenge 4

## Flourishing market towns

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### What we said in our prospectus:

*'The draw of the countryside as a place to live continues to have its impact. The population of rural towns is growing twice as fast as those in the rest of the country. But when rural towns expand to accommodate these new arrivals, all too often it takes the form of ever more housing estates – ringing the town and remote from jobs, shops, services and leisure facilities. The inevitable result: more and more people getting into their cars to go to work, to shop, to have a meal out, and less and less an integrated community. Developments of this kind are often aesthetically unattractive and invariably harmful for the community, the environment – and therefore the nation.'*

*'A study of traditional communities, and how they grew over the centuries to meet the needs of their inhabitants, shows with absolute clarity that the successful ones were the comprehensive ones, the integrated ones: neighbourhoods not estates, with all kinds of housing, local enterprises, local shops, communal open spaces, schools, public transport, doctors' surgeries, pubs and playgrounds. Before the car, every popular community grew this way. To tackle climate change and to build thriving communities, so must those we plan for today.'*

Many rural market towns are facing proposals for substantial housing growth and – usually separately – business parks and edge-of-town retail centres. All of the major political parties, and interest groups from the Home Builders Federation to the Campaign to Protect Rural England, agree that substantial numbers of new homes are needed in many rural towns, and so also work places and services. Existing housing waiting lists, longer lives, more single people, a generation of young people facing unaffordable house prices, and internal migratory pressure – it all adds up to many more homes and associated developments needed over time in and around the majority of market towns across rural England.

There is a real danger that current planning practice will deliver neither the quantity of housing we need nor the places people want to live in, let alone the integrated services that functioning neighbourhoods require. And poorly planned extensions will have a proportionately greater impact on smaller market towns than on large cities.

The new Coalition Government has begun to embark on a radical set of reforms to planning: the abolition of Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) targets, and the introduction of new incentives (and penalties) for Local Authorities to encourage support for development; an emphasis on community involvement in core planning decisions; and a fundamental shift away from national prescription.

Nationally a target of 3 million new homes by 2020 was set by the last government.<sup>43</sup> Regardless of the merits of this target, now abandoned, and even with lower levels of annual development and an end to regionally imposed development targets, the new Coalition Government remains clear that substantial new development will be needed. Within a generation new building will have a dramatic impact on the size and nature of most market towns.

It is vital that the new generation of community extensions and neighbourhoods do not repeat the mistakes of recent decades of development. It is fair to say that until now the focus of development in the majority of rural areas has been on delivering (or resisting) the numbers required by Government, rather than on creating attractive sustainable communities. The Local Development Framework (LDF) process has generally failed to encourage local authorities to fully embrace a longer-term, more creative, 'place shaping' role. Consequently, rural development has continued to take a developer-led, piecemeal approach.

Driven by targets, Local Authorities generally approved land for development incrementally, each piece of land a new pocket of housing (or business space or retail

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<sup>43</sup> As set out in the *Draft Legislative Programme 2008-09*. See [www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm73/7372/7372.pdf](http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm73/7372/7372.pdf)

park) – almost never integrated neighbourhoods and communities rich in diversity, opportunity, and local services. Such housing estates rarely ‘justify’ even a shop or a pub, let alone integrating employment, services, attractive centres. Over the years the numbers of homes mount up – hundreds of houses become thousands; they encircle the older parts of the town, with no sense of their own place, no facilities for residents, and with ‘public’ space wasted on grass verges in front of houses, while back gardens are nothing more than postage stamps.

These places are not ‘neighbourhoods’ in their own right; they are a sprawling series of housing estates tacked onto towns. They deliver little if any economic gain in themselves; and the wider economic value of extensions which create linked communities, with their own sense of place, can never be realised. Many older communities of comparable size support thriving shops and pubs and cafes in their centres, because they are places in their own right, even though they may also be part of larger communities. This sense of place cannot be built in retrospectively; it is a desirable by-product of a type of growth we have currently moved away from.

Building at high density, and therefore using land efficiently, can help to protect rural communities’ environmental assets. And housing built at high densities – densities typical of traditional villages and market towns – can be of an excellent standard, both in terms of the homes themselves and their surroundings. However, if high-density housing developments are poorly designed, they create social dislocation and environmental detriment.

New estates may be commonly on the edge of towns, but historically the road layouts of new developments have encouraged car use rather than cycling or walking. This is exacerbated if there are no nearby services or employment to walk or cycle to. As a result new developments which encourage car use and therefore generate congestion on main routes may cause environmental harm, both in terms of a loss of tranquillity and increased carbon emissions. And without local and community facilities of their own, there is little to build social sustainability and cohesion or links between new and existing settlements, and there will be little in the way of community life. Such development not only causes harm to the new but also to the existing settlement.

## Real neighbourhoods, genuine communities

How development takes place will significantly shape the character of our towns and that of the countryside over the next decade. There is no reason at all why new homes need to be delivered through incremental developments of poorly designed housing estates. We see a different way – returning to the roots of planning as place-shaping and community-building rather than development control and meeting national or regional targets.

Although the annual scale of the house-building programme has become a main focus of attention, in a sense the precise annual numbers are not the point. The growth of many – most – of our market towns will happen whoever is in government locally or nationally; only the pace of development alters. The new Coalition Government, committed to community involvement in planning and building the ‘Big Society’, has the opportunity to change the way development happens much more fundamentally – to ensure that growth is more environmentally-friendly in terms of both the new buildings created and its layout, design, mix of uses and character of development, thereby enhancing the sustainability of communities and meeting many of the concerns of the existing community about new development. At the same time, such an approach shares the value of development rather than rewarding individual speculators, resulting in the delivery of affordable housing, services, shops and facilities all at much less cost to government (local or national) than at present.

The first thing that is needed is a process that takes the development required over the next decade or so, and plans it as stage-by-stage extensions to the community. The plan-led approach should be applied from the very beginning: This crucially involves three key elements:

- Masterplanning, to map a strategic vision and plan for development.
- Community participation, such as ‘Enquiry by Design’, to help understand what new and existing communities want from new development.
- A strong partnership, including the Local Planning Authority, to shape the plan, and long-term investors to work with the community to assemble the site and deliver the plan.



By putting together the value unlocked by thousands of new homes, and planning a community with a sense of place, it is possible to deliver the infrastructure, the shops, the pubs and cafes, the schools, health centres and leisure facilities, the multi-functional green spaces, the business premises and the mixed housing that make a place a community, and to do so at less public cost.

### Masterplanning communities

A great masterplan delivers more than just a strategy for extracting the greatest market value from an area. Instead, it examines planning from the ‘bigger picture’ perspective of building a meaningfully sustainable community featuring housing (market and affordable intermingled), community facilities (health centres, libraries, community centres, and sports facilities), transport links (footpaths, cycle paths and bridle ways as well as roads), and private gardens and community green spaces (eco-gardens, playing fields and parks), as well as spaces for local businesses (shops, Post Offices, and office and retail spaces). It also plans all this in the context of the existing town centre and the surrounding villages. Inherited character is a key aspect of urban and rural masterplanning to produce places with character and distinctiveness.<sup>44</sup> Ultimately it is about making sure that development creates places that are attractive, vibrant, working communities for the people who live there, which link to and enhance surrounding existing communities. Masterplanning can also assist in site assembly and provides detailed guidance for subsequent planning applications.

Local Authorities still have many of the powers needed to deliver this kind of vision, but whereas they already underpin much of the urban renaissance and urban renewal programmes, they could be used much more in rural communities. In the last government’s Eco-Towns PPS,<sup>45</sup> conditions are listed which usefully describe the character of a properly shaped place. This PPS should be transformed into a code for development of sustainable communities, applicable to all types of growth, not a handful of stand-alone new eco-towns.

### Recommendation 28

**The Eco-Towns PPS should be evolved into information and advice on the development of sustainable communities and neighbourhoods, applicable to all types of growth, not just a handful of stand-alone new eco-towns.**

### Our commitment

**Following the abolition of national density targets and Regional Spatial Strategies, the TCPA, the RTPI, CABE and CPRE will work together with other relevant bodies on information and advice which will help local politicians and planners understand the potential to develop market towns in ways which produce attractive and sustainable settlements.**

### Empowering community place-shaping

The second key element is to use the tools of masterplanning, community engagement, and the range of planning powers to involve the community and be genuinely visionary and ambitious about what can be achieved; and then – most importantly – to deliver it. This is not just about allocating land for development on a particular side, or sides, of town.

Nor is this about an old-fashioned planning elite ‘delivering for the masses’. The best results will be achieved in community halls where the public and planners work together to discuss options and opportunities with maps and models. Today this is not what generally happens. In fact, it almost never happens. But in a few cases it has.

Such ‘Enquiry by Design’ and ‘Planning for Real’ processes were strongly advocated in *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, published in 1999 by the Urban Task Force.<sup>46</sup> The report examined the ability to build 4 million new homes by 2025 without encroaching on the Green Belt. The report’s key recommendations included emphasis on the need to reform the planning process so that it could be genuinely described as community led through local decision-making, better-

44 See, for example, the joint HCA and EH publication *Capitalising on the Inherited Landscape: An introduction to historic characterisation for master planning*. 2009. [www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/public/documents/HCA\\_Historical\\_Characterisation\\_Accessible\\_version.pdf](http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/public/documents/HCA_Historical_Characterisation_Accessible_version.pdf)

45 Planning Policy Statement: *Eco-towns – A Supplement to Planning Policy Statement 1*. Department for Communities and Local Government, 2009. [www.communities.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/planning/planningpolicyguidance/planningpolicystatements/planningpolicystatements/ppsecotowns/](http://www.communities.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/planning/planningpolicyguidance/planningpolicystatements/planningpolicystatements/ppsecotowns/)

46 *Towards an Urban Renaissance*. Report of the Urban Task Force chaired by Lord Rogers of Riverside. E & FN Spon, for Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1999

quality design, and a more integrated approach to community transport links to encourage people to be less reliant on their cars.

Developments at Poundbury in Dorchester and Upton in Northamptonshire are both examples of attractive places developed on the edge of town with their own identity. The central 'hub' of the community remains the existing town centre, but the new 'spokes' form small centres in their own right. Creating and delivering attractive, vibrant sustainable new neighbourhoods and community extensions with their own mix of housing, services, employment space, green space and community facilities should be the aim of every settlement with substantial allocated housing growth over time. In every successful example, the community has been drawn into the planning process and empowered to genuinely shape it. This process has been core to both its success and its acceptability.

#### Recommendation 29

**Local Authorities should adopt policies to ensure that the creation of new neighbourhoods and communities always involves the community in shaping sustainable proposals through effective participation such as 'Enquiry by Design' and 'Planning for Real'.**

#### A strong long-term partnership

There is plenty of experience of delivering new communities, but it has often been in urban areas or as stand-alone new towns. However, the skills of land assembly, phased development, public-private partnership and so on are transferable. A key advantage for the partners in such masterplanned long-term development is that the shared value of the development more easily funds necessary infrastructure and services – and cuts costs by delivering long-term uplift in value for an investor, rather than the short-term gains needed by traditional development models.

The lead development partners will need to be investors, with capital and a long-term commitment to the community they are building, who can ride out recessions and participate with the community. The development as a whole will need long-term involvement in the way that mixed-use urban regeneration companies and some larger Housing Associations specialise in, and which a number of pension funds and other long-term investors are now contemplating. It is also the principle on which the Homes and

Communities Agency was founded. The house-builder model of 'borrow quick, build quick, sell quick' will not deliver this, especially post-credit-crunch, although such house-builders may contribute to building it.

The nature of the development process proposed in this chapter unlocks value over time, and will take place over many years. Local Planning Authorities must be prepared and empowered to work in partnership with the private sector as well as with the HCA to assemble the land necessary. Urban regeneration specialists are used to this kind of work, where the overall rise in land values through the development is shared between landowners irrespective of whether their acre is for a supermarket, or housing, or an area of wetland habitat to deal with flood risk and water run-off. To achieve this the Local Planning Authority must be willing to work with a long-term lead developer/investor. If necessary, this includes a willingness to unlock parts of the land through Compulsory Purchase Orders.

In an era where Government funding is short, the realisation of the shared value across a strong vibrant new community allows better infrastructure and services to be funded at much less cost to the taxpayer.

#### Recommendation 30

**The Government and the HCA should, as part of the development of the new national planning policy framework and the review of planning powers, ensure that the tools and best practice know-how are available to Local Authorities/private sector partnerships to deliver 'whole community' developments; to deliver strong vibrant new communities and better infrastructure and services; and to deliver at much less cost to the taxpayer, including the use of site assembly through compulsory purchase when necessary.**

#### Creating greener communities

There is no case for encouraging general sprawl into the countryside, or for building on endless fields needlessly. But the efficient use of land should not mean the construction of unimaginative and bland predominantly residential quarters. Traditional villages or market towns with terraces, alley ways, shops, and family houses with good-sized gardens are commonly built at efficient densities, with an easy walk to a local shop or pub and well used areas of green space.

To achieve the same in new developments means more than just providing dull, tightly mown grassed areas with a scattering of easy-maintenance 'lollipop' trees. It means creating a green infrastructure varied in type and scale, taking greenery and the natural environment into the heart of every neighbourhood with a mix of formal and decidedly informal spaces and places. Natural England recommends that people living in towns and cities should have 'an accessible natural green space, of at least 2 hectares in size, no more than 300 metres (5 minutes' walk) from home'.<sup>47</sup> This will not be achieved by building poorly designed and realised housing estates. More often than not an individual green space can perform more than one function at a time – biodiversity, recreation, visual delight, cooling the 'urban heat island', and sustainable urban drainage.

In light of the summer floods of 2007, the location of new housing on or near floodplains and the quality of urban drainage have been brought into sharp perspective. The typical small gardens and paucity of landscaped space found on poorly designed housing estates means that rainwater runs off the large amounts of hard-standing provided for cars and into the drainage system, increasing urban waste water problems, causing stress to natural drainage channels and riverbanks, increasing sewerage costs, and adding to flood risk as watercourses become overloaded. Well designed green infrastructure could do much to help tackle these problems as well as deliver biodiversity benefits.<sup>48</sup>

The provision of a green infrastructure must be put on a par with the provision of the 'grey' infrastructure of transport, energy supply, etc. That means that it must be cared for as actively as we care for our homes and streets. We need to establish strong and sustainable funding models built on ground rent and long-term income streams from public investment for the long-term management of green infrastructure. Capital expenditure on creating new green spaces is a waste of money if those spaces are not maintained and managed to realise their full sustainable potential. It will also be essential that green space is guaranteed for the community against future development.

Private green space has huge value too: for recreation, flood prevention, natural urban waste water drainage, and biodiversity and habitat. There is a need for real

space for children to play safely (compared with the postage stamp gardens often delivered with even 'executive homes'), for opportunities for waste composting and water recycling, and for simple privacy and quality of life. The inability to host a tree of any size in a small modern garden results in an unbroken vista of brick and tile from every vantage point.

While cities often contain very large parks, many rural towns are short of really big publicly accessible open space, despite being surrounded by green fields which will never be developed, and with only limited public access. The landscape and tranquillity of such countryside is of immense national environmental, cultural, social and economic value. To maximise community gain from this, however, as much open countryside as possible must be accessible to the public. As green space in urban areas is provided by the maintenance of parkland, so in rural areas access to green space must be improved by encouraging access into the countryside. In addition, as communities grow, public green realm should always be incorporated within or on the edge of communities to enhance biodiversity and sustainability (in every sense), and to bring genuine community gain. Traditional English towns and cities often incorporated a great deal of green space within them as they grew, with enormous social, environmental and economic benefit.

### Recommendation 31

**Local Authorities should prioritise access to green space in new community developments, adopting the Natural England recommendation that people living in towns and cities should have 'an accessible natural green space, of at least 2 hectares in size, no more than 300 metres (5 minutes' walk) from home'.**

### Recommendation 32

**The HCA should work with Local Authorities and other bodies to provide sustainable funding models for the long-term management of green infrastructure in new communities and neighbourhoods, built on ground rent and long-term income streams from public investment.**

<sup>47</sup> Natural England's Standards for Accessible Natural Greenspace (ANGSt).

[www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/enjoying/places/greenspace/greenspacestandards.aspx](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/enjoying/places/greenspace/greenspacestandards.aspx)

<sup>48</sup> See [www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk)



# Challenge 5

## Empowering communities

### What we said in our prospectus:

*'For any or all of these aims to be achieved, there is one underlying and necessary first step. Local people in rural communities must be re-introduced to real local democracy. They have a far greater understanding of their community's needs – and given the opportunity to shape and take the decisions, supported and facilitated by councils with the powers and capability to help them do it, will be far more sensitive to the value and potential impact of proposed change, and more willing to contribute their own efforts to making it happen.'*

### The 'Big Society' in rural areas

Government is set to provide new opportunities through which local communities can take action to build more sustainable communities, preserve local services and generate higher levels of self-reliance.

The 'Big Society' agenda aims to empower and incentivise communities within the planning system to become more involved in decisions about supporting appropriate development. Community-led service provision will be encouraged through the 'Community Right to Bid' to take on public services, and the 'Community Right to Buy' provides a mechanism to retain valued facilities that may otherwise be lost. Where the community supports it, Local Housing Trusts can be created to deliver new mixed developments, according to the needs identified within the community.

These commitments will produce a shift in the relationships between local government and communities. Previously, local government was expected to lead on engaging communities to shape services and statutory plans. Under the 'Big Society' proposals, local communities can initiate the debate among local residents and then negotiate with local government on how their collective aspiration can be met, building on existing good practice approaches such as Parish Plans.

### Why empowerment is a vital part of the rural policy argument

Unlike many urban neighbourhoods, where empowerment has been dominated by improving influence on statutory partners, rural communities already take on far more responsibility themselves. Most community facilities and open space are already owned by the community. Self-governance, in the form of Town and Parish Councils, means that there is strong community identity and representation on community issues. The finance available through their precept on the Council Tax means that everyday maintenance of local facilities is often supported solely by the community itself, although in practice the strength of this activity varies enormously between different Parish Councils.

The traditionally high level of volunteering in rural communities and the resulting scale of community-led initiatives is also part of this 'empower yourself' culture. The current concerns of many to stimulate community action as a solution to overcoming public finance constraints should be addressed by learning from practice that has been developed and refined in some rural communities over many years.

There are two sets of reasons why the Rural Coalition believes that the approach it advocates to the economy, housing, planning, climate change and other issues will only be effective if communities in rural areas are given the strongest possible ability to decide for themselves what happens at local government, parish, and community level.

First, it is very widely acknowledged that the UK, and especially England, has had one of the most centralised systems of governance in the developed world. The new Coalition Government is committed to decentralisation and local decision-making, and we applaud this. In the past, assumptions about the efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery have not helped rural communities to work with providers to find innovative approaches that meet their needs. The planning system has traditionally been

dominated by restrictions on rural development, which has contributed to the loss of sustainability and vibrancy. While national planning policy has, in recent years, adopted a more flexible approach, many Local Planning Authorities still fail to recognise how this could benefit their local rural communities.

Secondly, people in rural areas experience a further set of challenges in getting their needs and points of view reflected in public decision-making. Even in Local Authorities with extensive rural territory, decisions may often be made in a large town without complete understanding of the differences between communities of different scale and location. The types of people and communities who would be at risk of exclusion anywhere – minorities, vulnerable young people, residents of social housing estates – are likely to experience a further layer of obstacle in rural areas to get their voice heard and their needs met.

### Community-led planning – empowerment in action

The new Coalition Government has set out proposals for empowering communities under the planning system which will offer rural communities the opportunity to discuss, agree and deliver a transformational vision for their local area. In the ‘Big Society’ proposals, local debate and decision-making is referred to as ‘collaborative democracy’.

The Rural Coalition believes that implementation has, as a priority, to consider how communities take on this task, and arrive at collective decisions. This can then form the basic building block, not just of decisions on planning, but on the ‘Community Right to Bid’, the ‘Community Right to Buy’, and all other aspects of shaping local service delivery. Fortunately, the building block already exists in the widespread use of community-led planning in rural communities across the country.

Community-led planning is a structured process, organised by the community, that takes place over an extended period (see the diagram on the next page). Local community groups, parish councillors, activists and volunteers work together through the process, helped by external facilitation, to create a vision for the community and an action plan to achieve it. The process uses a mix of evidence collection, different types of consultation, and debate at the very local community level. Every citizen should have the

opportunity to participate, and the resulting vision should focus on the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of the community and all those who live and work there.

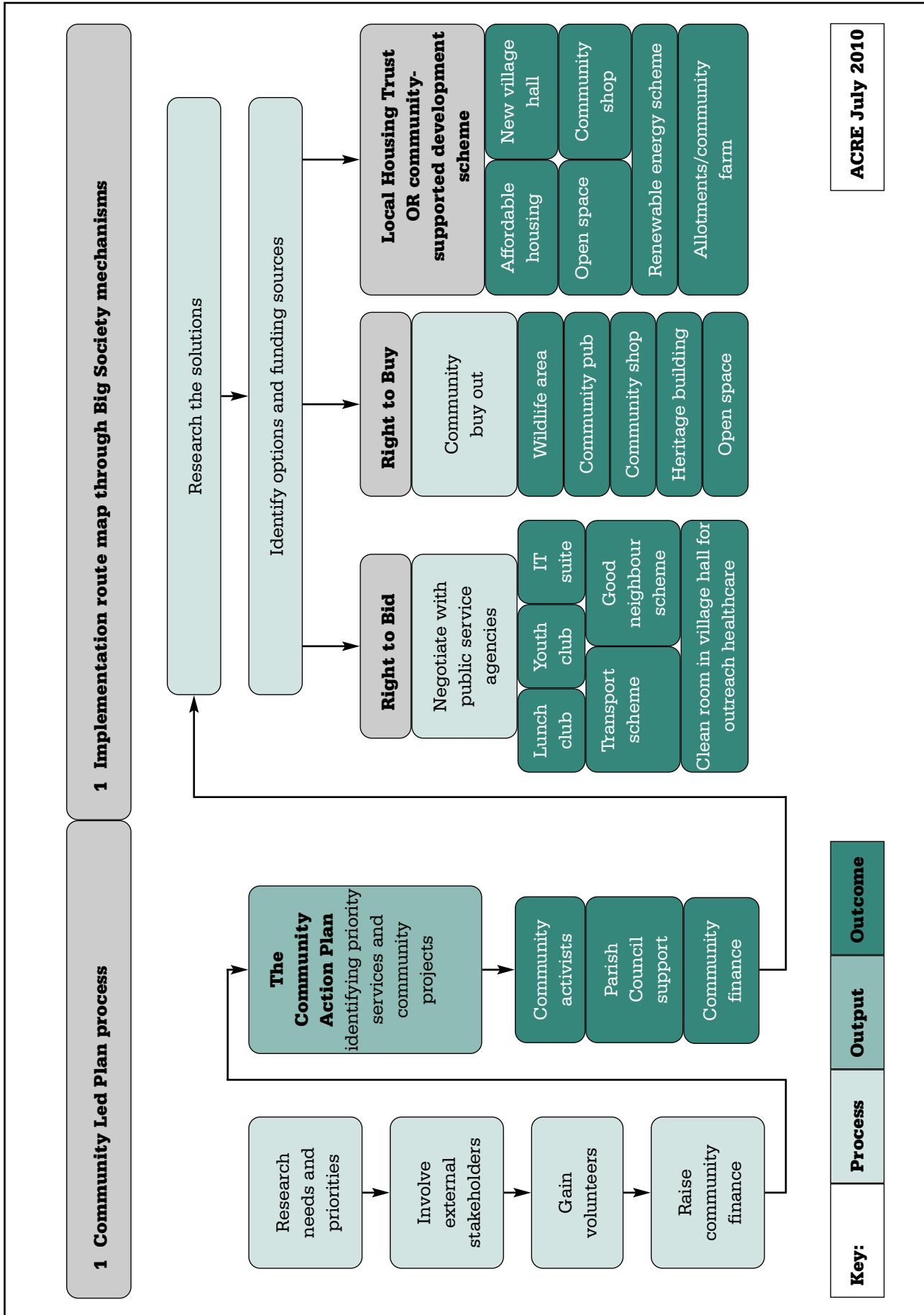
Effective tools and techniques for community-led planning have been tried and tested in rural areas over the last decade. The two most frequently used are Town Action Planning (formerly the Market Town Healthcheck) and Parish and Community Planning. The two approaches differ only in the sense that the first uses community consultation to develop a clear strategic plan for a Market Town Partnership, while the second meets the specific needs of smaller rural communities by having a stronger focus on generating community capacity and commitment with which to deliver the resulting action plan.

### The community’s action plan

Actions resulting from a community-led plan can vary from small scale (provision of more dog litter bins) to those of more significance in creating sustainable facilities and services such as a community-owned shop, refurbishment or extensions to community halls, or new community-owned transport provision. Increasingly, plans have tackled the impact of climate change, producing community-based emergency plans, energy-saving and recycling initiatives. Local authorities have been particularly appreciative of community inputs to emergency plans since the dispersion of rural communities across wide areas presents a significant challenge to designing an emergency response strategy.

New opportunities now exist to expand asset ownership for many different purposes to meet current and future needs. Community-based food initiatives can help to bolster local food agendas and tourism, renewable energy production is widely seen as a way of securing revenue and resources, and community-owned land dedicated to increasing biodiversity and recreational opportunities can lead to increased local health and well-being. Parish Councils are the normal provider of allotment land locally, and community composting schemes and community orchards offer new income-generating opportunities to deliver community benefit.

Of particular relevance to the ‘Big Society’ are actions that involve taking over local facilities and services, such as commercial retail outlets or negotiating with public service providers to deliver or supplement



Community-led planning and implementation through 'Big Society' mechanisms

services in health, social care, employment, and education. Whereas many of these already come forward in action plans, the community's 'Right to Buy' and the 'Right to Bid' will create a more supportive context for such initiatives to happen. Research<sup>49</sup> shows that:

- By the end of 2008, over 3,000 communities had produced a community-led plan,<sup>50</sup> covering an estimated population of 6.5 million people in 66 principal authority areas. Many of these plans now need refreshing to adapt to new circumstances, particularly where retail and public services are now at risk as a result of the recession and public service constraints.
- Detailed research in the East of England found that since 2002, 231 communities have created plans, with over 9,000 individual actions to improve their locality. The community themselves were able to take on 47% of these actions without external support. Of the remainder, 34% required negotiation with public service providers to bring them about.<sup>51</sup>

### The outcomes of the community-led planning process

The benefits of community-led planning have been well researched:

- High rates of participation (70% or more household involvement is often achieved) and greater understanding about civic structures.
- Higher turn-out at elections and more candidates standing for Parish Council elections.
- Harnessing the energy and commitment of volunteers to make things happen at a very local level, saving money and resources.
- Bringing forward new local projects that already have proven community support.
- Success in attracting external funding for high-priority local projects.
- Increased influence over statutory policies and service design.

- An evidence base to support statutory policy development in Sustainable Community Strategies, Local Area Agreements and Local Development Frameworks.

### Connecting into public sector strategies and plans

The community-led planning toolkit developed by ACRE's Rural Community Action Network stresses the need for involvement by Local Authority members and officers at crucial times in the process, so that a realistic and achievable action plan is developed.

Very many rural Local Authorities have already bought into the value of community-led planning, several agreeing protocols on how they get involved during the process and how they respond to priority actions that result.

While such community-led planning techniques have been valuable in helping to shape public service delivery, Local Authorities need to be much more engaged in the production of such plans to benefit from their potential. Unfortunately, many Local Authorities have, in recent years, begun to focus their empowerment initiatives on more top-down engagement with communities, in line with more urban models, which can be ineffective and expensive to deliver in rural areas. Furthermore, such approaches are not always compatible with what the community wishes to discuss, and how it wishes that discussion to take place.

Those connected with supporting and undertaking community-led plans want to capitalise on the value of past investment and build on the culture that has been developed in rural communities over many decades. We risk losing this if the process is insufficiently recognised as 'best practice' in generating empowerment in rural areas.

#### Recommendation 33

**The Government should recognise and adopt community-led planning as 'best practice', and should identify quality standards for delivering it, as part of putting in place the mechanisms to underpin the 'Big Society'.**

49 ACRE Policy Position Papers. See [www.acre.org.uk](http://www.acre.org.uk)

50 Excludes previous approaches to community-led planning such as Village Appraisals and Village Design Statements

51 See [www.acre.org.uk/communityengagement\\_parishplans.html](http://www.acre.org.uk/communityengagement_parishplans.html)

### Case study Framework for community planning in the South West

In November 2009, principal Local Authorities across the South West, working with the South West ACRE Network, signed up to a common **Framework to support community-led planning**. Members of South West Councils agreed the following.

*'This Framework starts from the premise that every local community in the South West Region of England, working in association with local partners, should have the opportunity to prepare a community-based plan setting out its vision for its area and the necessary action needed to achieve it.*

*'So long as these plans meet certain quality criteria, this Framework endorses that they should be used to engage and direct:*

- *Regional spatial and service delivery strategies and policies.*
- *Community Strategies for county, unitary and appropriate districts/boroughs.*
- *Policy decisions and the planning and delivery of services.*
- *The allocation of resources.*
- *The statutory land use planning system.'*

In agreeing this Framework, the parties involved will only endorse plans that have demonstrated the criteria of quality that are encompassed in ACRE's national guidance on community-led planning, and where due cognisance has been taken of District, Unitary, County and Regional priorities.

### Taking forward community action plans

The process of community-led planning generates a series of interest groups prepared to lend their efforts to pursuing specific projects within the action plan – for example, the steering group for the community shop, or the environmental group looking after a wildlife area, or the parents group running the new youth club.

Some actions will involve close co-operation from wider statutory agencies and partners. For example, as a structured process across a market town, community-led planning can provide a first stage in planning, in conjunction with the Local Authority, the long-term physical development of a community, as well as linking this to 'softer' issues such as service provision. Where major development opportunities are identified, the action planning stage would be extended to include detailed masterplanning – to map a strategic vision and plan for development. This would be followed by techniques such as 'Enquiry by Design' and 'Planning for Real' to facilitate community involvement in preparing site-specific development briefs.

Where the community is eager to ensure that vulnerable residents – for instance the old, the young and those without full mobility – continue to benefit from a service that is under threat from funding constraints, the Rural Coalition believes that this should initiate a debate with local public service providers. If the 'Community Right to Bid' to take on services only covers 'like for like' provision, then it will probably result in mechanisms under formal commissioning processes. However, in rural areas, it is more usual for supplementary or complementary services to be offered by the community, such as provision of community-based transport to take residents to services or integrating services within community-owned facilities. If public service providers wish to benefit from the ability of rural communities to harness local volunteers to support the target users, and make a contribution towards efficiency savings, then such debate should be both constructive and enabling. It may be necessary to free up small amounts of grant funding from the savings made to the public purse, to kick-start the replacement community-led service. The Rural Coalition believes that the 'Right to Bid' needs to encompass both types of community service provision.

#### Recommendation 34

**If the 'Right to Bid' leads communities to offer lower-cost voluntary solutions to retaining public services they do not wish to lose and which are under threat for financial reasons, Local Authorities and public agencies should look at diverting some of the savings made by withdrawing their services into supporting such small-scale, lower-cost, community-led solutions.**

The community-led planning process often becomes the trigger for community-led affordable housing

development.<sup>52</sup> By exploring local needs within the process, local people come to understand the housing needs of others who live and work in their community, and work together to seek potential solutions. This will then form a basis for determining the support of Town/Parish Councils and principal Local Authorities for proposals, subject to more detailed work in relation to the need, scale, viability and design. This will be reinforced if it gives communities a clear right to initiate community-led affordable housing schemes.

The Conservative Party's manifesto proposals on incentivising local communities to accept development<sup>53</sup> include passing some of the financial benefit received by Local Authorities from central government directly to communities to support local community infrastructure and services. Local Authorities will need appropriate policies in place for this to happen. More of the action plans resulting from the community's vision may become a reality if there is a suitable source of capital and revenue finance that could counteract the inevitable reduction in ongoing public funding.

### A whole community approach

Central government needs to resist the temptation to prescribe the how and when of empowerment under the 'Big Society', allowing communities to find, for themselves, how best to capitalise on local capacity and skills. Previous urban-dominated approaches to empowerment have, for instance, restricted eligibility in investment programmes to 'voluntary sector' organisations, ignoring the role that Parish Councils may play in providing community services and facilities and impacting on the relevance of such programmes to rural communities. In one community, the key local player may be a Parish Council; elsewhere it might be a tenants association or the village hall committee. What is important is that all take joint ownership of the community's shared aspirations, as defined within a community-led plan, and that the most appropriate body within the community is tasked to deliver each action.

### The role of Parish and Town Councils

There are over 9,000 Parish, Town, Neighbourhood and Community Councils (often known as 'local councils') with over 80,000 elected representatives serving on them.<sup>54</sup> While they exist throughout the country, including large metropolitan areas, they are much more distinctively and consistently characteristic of smaller towns and rural areas. They both manage services and projects locally and influence other tiers of local government, for example commenting on planning applications.

Community-led planning has an added advantage in reconnecting representative democracy with local participation, through involving the elected members of Parish and Town Councils and local government. The action plan developed provides the evidence needed to strengthen local advocacy by representatives and, with it, secure better local outcomes.

A rich landscape of community organisations and activity underpins the vibrancy of rural areas, providing services, managing facilities like village halls, and providing contact and an opportunity for local people to work together to influence decisions at different levels of government. The community sector comprises, in the main, all-volunteer groups, many managing significant local assets and, increasingly, social enterprises like Community Land Trusts or those now running village shops and pubs. The relentless market failure in many public and commercial services, which is likely to increase rapidly over the coming years, creates both opportunities and responsibilities for such groups to harness their energies to benefit local residents. However, the lack of paid staff to take on the challenge of leading such projects in rural areas requires appropriate expertise and support to be available, and a context set, via local statutory plans, that enables projects to be managed and implemented without draining local enthusiasm or energies.

52 See *Community Led Planning*. Policy Position Paper. ACRE, 2009.

[www.acre.org.uk/DOCUMENTS/publications/Policypositionpapers/CommunityLedPlanning.pdf](http://www.acre.org.uk/DOCUMENTS/publications/Policypositionpapers/CommunityLedPlanning.pdf)

53 *Open Source Planning*. Policy Green Paper No. 14. Conservative Party, February 2010.

[www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Green%20Papers/planning-green-paper.ashx?dl=](http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Green%20Papers/planning-green-paper.ashx?dl=)

54 *Getting Your Message Across. A communications toolkit for local councils*. National Association of Local Councils. May 2010.

[www.nalc.gov.uk/Document/Download.aspx?uid=16adc0da-aa36-4fc9-b1e4-6bc0e04cf0d0](http://www.nalc.gov.uk/Document/Download.aspx?uid=16adc0da-aa36-4fc9-b1e4-6bc0e04cf0d0). See also [www.nalc.gov.uk](http://www.nalc.gov.uk)



**Recommendation 35**

**Parish and Town Councils should become the 'guardian' of the community-led plan, monitoring progress and regularly refreshing priorities in the light of changing circumstances, as part of their Power of Competence. Many of the actions may affect property owned by them, or services delivered by them. Many will involve the financial support that parishes can offer to local groups who also own property and provide services.**

This stance is supported by the work of the Carnegie Commission for Rural Community Development that comprised internationally recognised rural experts from a wide range of backgrounds and disciplines and covered five jurisdictions in the UK and Ireland. In its Final Report, *A Charter for Rural Communities*,<sup>55</sup> published in June 2007, the Commission suggested that the dynamic, vibrant, engaged, sustainable rural community of the future would display a number of interrelated characteristics and that empowering local governance would be a key requisite. We endorse two of its key recommendations.

**Recommendation 36**

**Parish and community level councils should be encouraged to prepare and publish a community action plan every four years. Higher-tier authorities should consider these plans within their own strategic planning processes.**

## Enhancing community assets through community ownership

National empowerment initiatives in recent years have had a focus on communities acquiring ownership of land and facilities, because local control leads to better and more responsive services. A wide review of community asset ownership and management, completed by Barry Quirk for the Department for Communities and Local Government in 2007,<sup>56</sup> provided national momentum and resulted in the set up of the

Asset Transfer Unit,<sup>57</sup> accompanied by government investment in transfer activity.

Rural communities in England already exhibit high levels of community ownership of local assets. For instance, Parish and Town Councils own or control most of their local open space, recreational facilities, car parks and allotments.

In addition, there are over 9,000 community-owned halls in England's rural communities, with a total asset value of £3.1 billion. According to ACRE research,<sup>58</sup> 58% provide the only multi-purpose meeting place in the community. Most act as a hub for democratic participation as well as the delivery of services. The average annual expenditure to maintain these halls is just under £9,000 per annum, supplemented by an average of 18.5 hours a week of volunteering effort. Only 3% of these halls receive any regular Local Authority funding.

Use of rural community halls has trebled in the last 20 years. This model of asset ownership is sustainable largely because of the self-help and volunteer effort that goes into their maintenance and a clear focus on its main purpose – providing community space for local activity. This makes it an even more cost-effective model in the current climate than one that requires continued revenue investment from public finance.

Rural communities have the potential to extend asset ownership to meet new needs and new challenges, but this must be done in a way that recognises some of the constraints:

- A small rural community may not be able to support more than one viable facility aiming to provide a particular service within the community.
- The community must back the most appropriate asset/location to meet specific community needs and on which to focus its energies and its available finance.
- Integration of services within existing facilities may be more cost-effective than acquiring new assets.

55 *A Charter for Rural Communities*. Final Report. Carnegie Commission for Rural Community Development, June 2007. <http://rural.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/files/rural/A%20Charter%20for%20Rural%20Communities.pdf>

56 *Making Assets Work: The Quirk Review*. Department for Communities and Local Government, May 2007. [www.communities.gov.uk/communities/thirdsector/communityassettransfer/](http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/thirdsector/communityassettransfer/)

57 See <http://atu.org.uk/>

58 See [www.acre.org.uk/communityassets\\_villagehallresearch.html](http://www.acre.org.uk/communityassets_villagehallresearch.html)

- If there are insufficient volunteers to manage and maintain existing community facilities,<sup>59</sup> taking on new initiatives that require volunteer effort to be sustainable may carry very strong risks, particularly where loan finance is used to finance purchase.

A rurally sensitive solution is therefore to ask what kind of asset should be acquired for what kind of purpose, before it can be seen as an empowering solution. In true rural form, integrated solutions emerge through considering the community as a whole, rather than preparing individual business plans for a particular asset. For instance, village halls have expanded their remit to incorporate community-owned shops and Post Offices, pubs have developed local lunch clubs for the elderly, and church halls have incorporated pre-schools and youth clubs.

Should the response be a community buy-out of a commercial outlet such as a shop, pub or garage, then the community will now be considerably helped by proposals under the 'Big Society' on the 'Community Right to Buy'.

### Strengthening local leadership and capacity

The lessons learnt from a decade of community-led regeneration across rural areas demonstrate that to be successful key decisions and delivery need to be devolved beyond the principal Local Authorities to the community level and be backed by suitable support for community capacity-building. As the Carnegie UK Trust states in *A Manifesto for Rural Communities*,<sup>60</sup> published in October 2009: *'Although the rhetoric of governments is encouraging a 'new localism' and greater community engagement, without sustained investment in growing the capacity of all those who need to be involved in the process, these aspirations will not be fulfilled.'*

Success crucially depends on building increasing capacity and effectiveness at the community leadership level – in short, helping communities to help

themselves. Over the years, support mechanisms for rural community action have been well developed to meet the needs of rural communities. Given the new dynamics created within 'Big Society' proposals, it is all the more important that communities are able to access relevant and independent support:

- At the beginning of 2009/10, Local Authorities were providing 54% of the £1.8 million per annum required to support investment in the local community-led plan facilitation service, which is delivered mainly by Rural Community Action Network members across England's rural areas. Of other funding secured, 15% came via national Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) investment and 10% was earned income.
- The Rural Community Action Network<sup>61</sup> provides a country-wide network of facilitators and advisers at local level, acting as a catalyst to support rural communities to plan their own future and deliver and sustain community-based initiatives. Member organisations, based at County level, specialise in advice on rural priorities such as management of facilities, community transport, affordable housing, and community enterprise. They also act as an advocate to achieve equity for rural communities, brokering solutions with Local Authorities and other service providers.
- County Association of Local Councils (CALCs) are affiliated to the National Association of Local Councils (NALC).<sup>62</sup> They provide extensive training and capacity-building to support community governance through Parish and Town Councils.
- Action for Market Towns (AMT) has founded a Market Towns Academy<sup>63</sup> that helps town and community partnerships to assess their own organisational development and training needs, and provides tailored training courses on leadership, fund-raising, financial management, and other core skills. The success of the Academy is all about greater recognition being given to the value of local leadership.

59 ACRE's rural community buildings survey found that retention and recruitment of volunteers to sustain community halls was identified as one of the major challenges

60 *A Manifesto for Rural Communities: Inspiring Community Innovation*. Carnegie UK Trust, October 2009. [www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/files/main/A%20Manifesto%20for%20Rural%20Communities.pdf](http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/files/main/A%20Manifesto%20for%20Rural%20Communities.pdf)

61 See [www.acre.org.uk/aboutthenetwork\\_index.html](http://www.acre.org.uk/aboutthenetwork_index.html)

62 See [www.nalc.gov.uk/](http://www.nalc.gov.uk/)

63 See <http://towns.org.uk/market-towns-academy/>

**Recommendation 37**

**To deliver the 'Big Society', localism and empowered communities, the Government needs to start by building local delivery capacity. Support organisations (such as ACRE, Planning Aid, etc.) should, as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review, gain longer-term stability in their Government funding to help facilitate community planning and community capacity-building. Individuals should also be encouraged to offer pro bono support – for example planning aid as part of Continuing Professional Development.**

## An enabling public sector

If the 'Big Society' is to be successful in generating new community initiatives, local government will need to provide an enabling context. Lessons can be learned from existing good practice in empowerment. At the same time, new ways can be found to make existing support mechanisms more effective – for example through better co-ordination of existing bodies.

The Beacon Scheme, set up by the Department for Communities and Local Government and managed by the IDeA (the Improvement and Development Agency), has highlighted valuable aspects of good practice in empowerment as part of its wider role to share best practice in service delivery across local government. Indeed, over the years a number of Beacon themes have been focused on wider empowerment and community-led planning in particular. These have included:

- **Round 6: Getting Closer to Communities**, which among its conclusions stated that *'a dynamic relationship between authorities and communities requires that, on the one hand, authorities deliver services in an effective and integrated way at a local level, and on the other, that they support the development of the communities' own role'*.
- **Round 7: Improving Rural Services, Empowering Communities**, which concluded that *'often the best services may be those delivered locally with local commitment but 'empowered' by someone else through a process of engagement and leadership'*.
- **Round 8: Promoting Sustainable Communities through the Planning Process**,

which included the conclusion that *'for planning to play its part in delivering sustainable communities people need to see and experience planning as a system which works for them. A system they value as something which can help them deliver their vision for their communities – retaining what is valued and changing what is not.'*

- **Round 9: Transforming Services through Citizen Engagement and Empowerment**, which concluded that *'there is a growing recognition that, by working with users, organisations can create services that are more effective and have higher levels of customer satisfaction. This is an evolving area, with scope for innovation and the opportunity to develop ground-breaking approaches to service delivery and engagement.'*

A key factor in the success of community empowerment is the degree to which communities take the lead, rather than act as passive recipients of the efforts Local Authorities to 'engage' with local residents. A balance will need to be found between taking the lead and being effectively engaged as partners in developing ideas.

Everyone in a position of authority, or trying to make empowerment work, needs to understand what it really means if cost-effective solutions are to be generated:

- Addressing the issues local people want to talk about, as well as finding space to discuss those which may seem more important to decision-makers.
- Finding times and places and mechanisms to exchange information and engage in debate which work for the people they are seeking to empower. Sending out voluminous technical documents and asking for comments, or holding meetings during the working day, for example, may exclude a lot of people from participation.
- Finding ways to demonstrate that the approach is not box-ticking or marginal, but is genuinely intended to make a difference. It needs to be clear, for example, that community involvement is taking place at a stage when decisions have not been made; or an invitation to take on the running of a service is genuinely open to fundamental thinking about what is provided and how.

- At the same time, not having unreasonable expectations of what local people, especially if they are not paid, can and should be doing. People have reasonable expectations that they pay their taxes to have public services delivered to them, by people who have the professional competence to do so. Letting people shape how this happens, giving them the opportunity to complement it by volunteering, or letting them deliver it through a mechanism like a social enterprise in which people are paid fairly for what they do, is appropriate. 'We're pulling out, over to you' is not.
- Providing feedback through the process which builds confidence in its genuineness. 'You said, we did', for example, is an effective technique for building assurance that time spent in a meeting after work is worthwhile compared with staying home with the television.
- Being careful that engagement is benefiting from input that has reached all sections of the community – for instance through demonstrating that the proposals or offers from a community result from a high-quality, community-led plan. Among those groups who may get left out if there is not a conscious strategy for involving them are: children and young people, minority communities, and people who are housebound or do not have access to a car.

### **Recommendation 38**

**We welcome the new Government's commitment to localism. The planned Decentralisation and Localism Bill provides an excellent opportunity to remove some of the barriers to effective, accountable leadership in rural areas, including taking measures to encourage Local Authorities to devolve to communities part of any benefits gained through accepting more development in their area to support community facilities and community-led services.**

# Act now

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Sustainability cannot be achieved by how we currently live our lives. Change can sometimes be necessary to maintain vibrant communities and deliver more sustainable lifestyles.

A more sustainable future for all rural communities is both essential and achievable. It demands a fundamental change of approach at both national and local level. The Rural Coalition is committed to making it happen.

## **Our commitment**

**All members of the Rural Coalition will work to build on this report by continuing to work together with other relevant bodies to influence the thinking and behaviour of national and local politicians and planning professionals – for example through publications showing good ways of using new freedoms at local level to meet the high-level tests set in national policy, and best practice material highlighting successful approaches.**







# Facilitators, advisers and supporters

The Rural Coalition has been supported and advised by the following organisations:



## Action for Market Towns

Action for Market Towns is an independent, national, membership organisation dedicated to maintaining vibrant and viable small towns. AMT is a not-for-profit company and a registered charity which offers training, consultancy, a range of member services and national advocacy for the policies needed to help our towns.

Contact: Action for Market Towns, 5 Baxter Court, Higher Baxter Street, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk IP33 1ES  
t: 01284 756567 f: 01284 761816 e: [info@towns.org.uk](mailto:info@towns.org.uk) w: <http://towns.org.uk/>



## Rural Services Network (RSN)

The RSN is a group of over 200 service providers and local authorities working to establish best practice across the spectrum of rural service provision and to represent the collective concerns of rural service providers and the communities they serve, to Government and its agencies. The RSN exists to ensure services delivered to the communities of predominantly rural England are as strong and as effective as possible.

Contact: Graham Biggs, Chief Executive, Rural Services Network and SPARSE-Rural  
t: 01588674922 (mobile 07966 790197) w: [www.rsnonline.org.uk/](http://www.rsnonline.org.uk/)



## Carnegie UK Trust Rural Community Development Programme

The Carnegie UK Trust Rural Community Development Programme examines and promotes ways in which rural communities across the UK and Ireland can be empowered to shape and influence change and work to ensure that rural priorities are fully recognised by decision-makers.

Contact: Carnegie UK Trust, Head office, Comely Park House, 80 New Row, Dunfermline KY 12 7 EJ  
t: 01383 721445 e: [kirsty@carnegieuk.org](mailto:kirsty@carnegieuk.org) w: [www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk](http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk)



## Plunkett Foundation

The Plunkett Foundation is a national organisation based in Woodstock, Oxfordshire that helps rural communities to take control of the issues important to them through social enterprise, co-operatives and community-ownership.

Contact: [www.plunkett.co.uk](http://www.plunkett.co.uk)

Further helpful advice has been provided by:



## Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE)

The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) is the Government's advisor on architecture, urban design and public space in England. CABE offers expert advice and practical support to people making decisions about the design of buildings and places.

Contact: CABE, 1 Kemble Street, London WC2B 4AN  
t: 020 7070 6700 f: 020 7070 6777 e: [info@cabe.org.uk](mailto:info@cabe.org.uk) w: [www.cabe.org.uk/](http://www.cabe.org.uk/)

## English Heritage (EH)

EH is the Government's statutory adviser on the historic environment. It exists to protect and promote England's spectacular historic environment and ensure that its past is researched and understood.

Contact: Stephen Trow, Head of National Rural and Environmental Advice, English Heritage, 1 Waterhouse Square, 138-142 Holborn, London EC1N 2ST  
t: 020 7973 3018 f: 020 7973 3001 e: [steve.trow@english-heritage.org.uk](mailto:steve.trow@english-heritage.org.uk)  
w: [www.english-heritage.org.uk/](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/)



**National Association of Local Councils (NALC)**

NALC is the nationally recognised membership body representing the interests of around 9,000 local councils and their 80,000 local councillors in England. Local councils serve electorates ranging from small rural communities to major cities; all are independently elected and raise a precept from the local community. Together, they can be identified as among the nation's most influential grouping of grassroots opinion-formers.

Contact: Justin Griggs, Head of Policy and Development, NALC, 109 Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3LD

t: 020 7637 1865 e: [justin.griggs@nalc.gov.uk](mailto:justin.griggs@nalc.gov.uk) w: [www.nalc.gov.uk/](http://www.nalc.gov.uk/)



**National Housing Federation (NHF)**

The NHF represents 1,200 independent, not-for-profit housing associations in England and is the voice of affordable housing. Its mission is to support and promote the work that housing associations do and campaign for better housing and neighbourhoods.

Contact: National Housing Federation Head Office, Lion Court, 25 Procter Street, London WC1V 6NY

t: 020 7067 1010 f: 020 7067 1011 e: [info@housing.org.uk](mailto:info@housing.org.uk) w: [www.housing.org.uk/](http://www.housing.org.uk/)

**The English National Park Authorities Association (ENPAA)**

ENPAA exists to promote and further the needs of the ten English National Park Authorities (NPA's) by providing a collective voice for their views, supporting the development and capacity of the NPAs to effect change and working in partnership with other bodies where this adds value.

Contact: English National Park Authorities Association, 1st Floor, 2-4 Great Eastern Street, London EC2A 3NW

t: 020 7655 4812 f: 020 7092 9970 e: [enquiries@enpaa.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@enpaa.org.uk) w: [www.enpaa.org.uk](http://www.enpaa.org.uk)



**The Commission for Rural Communities (CRC)** brought the Rural Coalition together in September 2008 and has supported the Rural Coalition Chair and its Members with the production of this report and with technical advice on its content.

The CRC is a Non-Departmental Public Body whose statutory purpose is to promote awareness of the social and economic needs of people who live and work in rural areas and help decision-makers across and beyond government identify how those needs can best be addressed.

Contact: Commission for Rural Communities, John Dower House, Crescent Place, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire GL50 3RA

t: 01242 521381 f: 01242 584270 e: [info@ruralcommunities.gov.uk](mailto:info@ruralcommunities.gov.uk)  
w: [www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/)

# The Rural Coalition



The Rural Coalition comprises the following organisations:

## Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE)

ACRE is the national body of the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN), whose local member organisations provide comprehensive support for rural communities throughout England to take action for themselves to achieve a vibrant and sustainable future.

Contact: ACRE, Somerford Court, Somerford Road, Cirencester,  
Gloucestershire GL7 1TW

t: 01285 653477 e: [acre@acre.org.uk](mailto:acre@acre.org.uk) w: [www.acre.org.uk](http://www.acre.org.uk)



## Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE)

CPRE is a charity with a network of over 200 district groups and a branch in every county that campaigns for a sustainable future for the English countryside. Through their work they aim to ensure a beautiful, tranquil and diverse countryside that everyone can value and enjoy.

Contact: CPRE, 128 Southwark Street, London SE1 0SW

t: 020 7981 2800 e: [info@cpre.org.uk](mailto:info@cpre.org.uk) w: [www.cpre.org.uk](http://www.cpre.org.uk)



## Country Land and Business Association (CLA)

The CLA is the membership organisation for owners of land, property and businesses in rural England and Wales. It offers its members leadership and professional advice. It speaks for everyone who believes in a living and working countryside.

Contact: CLA, 16 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PQ

t: 020 7235 0511 f: +44 (0)20 7235 4696 e: [mail@cla.org.uk](mailto:mail@cla.org.uk)  
w: [www.cla.org.uk/](http://www.cla.org.uk/)



## The Local Government Group (LG Group)

The LG Group works on behalf of councils to support, promote and improve local government. Members of the LG Group (which includes the Local Government Association, LG Improvement and Development, LG Employers, LG Regulation, LG Local Leadership and Local Partnerships) are part of a strong collective voice that argues the case for local government at every opportunity.

Contact: LG Group, Local Government House, Smith Square, London SW1P 3HZ

t: 020 7664 3000 e: [info@local.gov.uk](mailto:info@local.gov.uk) w: [www.local.gov.uk/](http://www.local.gov.uk/)



## Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)

The RTPI is a charity whose object, as stated in its Royal Charter, is to advance the science and art of town planning for the benefit of the public. The RTPI champions the role of spatial planning, which gives people a real say in shaping the places where they live and work, and ensures that sustainability is at the heart of all planning activity.

Contact: RTPI, 41 Botolph Lane, London EC3R 8DL

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## Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA)

The TCPA is an independent charity working to improve the art and science of planning. The TCPA puts social justice and the environment at the heart of policy debate and inspires government, industry and campaigners to take a fresh perspective on major issues, including planning policy, housing, regeneration and climate change.

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