



RURAL SERVICES NETWORK

The Rural Services Manifesto 2010 and Beyond

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www.rsnonline.org.uk

1. ABOUT THE RURAL SERVICES NETWORK

The Rural Services Network is a group of over 250 service providers and local authorities working to establish best practice across the spectrum of rural service provision. The network has representation across the complete range of rural services, including local authorities, public bodies, businesses, charities and voluntary groups.

We are devoted to safeguarding and improving services in rural communities across England. We are the only national network specifically focusing on this vital aspect of rural life.

The network has three main purposes:

- **Representing** the case for a better deal for rural service provision
- **Exchanging** useful and relevant information
- **Developing and sharing** best practice

The Rural Services Network exists to ensure services delivered to the communities of predominantly rural England are as strong and as effective as possible.

There are two operating arms of the network:

the [Sparsity Partnership for Authorities Delivering Rural Services](#) (SPARSE-Rural) and the [Rural Services Partnership](#) (a not for profit company).

The term 'predominately rural' refers to counties and Local Authority districts with at least 50 percent of their population living in rural settlements (i.e. rural towns, villages, hamlets and dispersed dwellings) as identified in the Office for National Statistics' rural definition, and including larger market towns as identified in the Defra classification of local authority districts. The rural definition and classification were devised by the Rural Evidence Research Centre (RERC) at Birkbeck College. Further information on these can be found on the RERC website at www.nerc.ac.uk.

2. INTRODUCTION

This Rural Manifesto is a product of a comprehensive consultation process with our membership and other individuals and organisations with an interest in rural affairs. The first step toward this document was taken on the 27th of July 2009 when we launched our consultation paper entitled "Towards a Rural Manifesto". With over 50 responses received, the measures called for here reflect a wide

constituency of opinion among those with an interest in rural issues. (NB. Individual members of the Rural Services Network may not agree with everything we say and cannot be committed to implementing or articulating matters they do not support).

We received responses from a diverse range of organisations, from elected unitary, county district and parish/town councils to national interest groups and statutory organisations and the community and voluntary sectors. This diversity is well reflected in this document.

Whilst recognising urban/rural interdependencies and indeed the common issues which both types of areas face we stress that rural areas are not just a retreat for the rich and the elderly. Nor are they – despite the importance of both – only inhabited by farmers and tourists. Britain’s countryside is a living and working part of the British economy, society, and culture. The warmth and picturesque beauty of our rural communities are often the ideal place to start a young family or a new business. With a rich history and strong cultural traditions, this manifesto seeks to secure, protect and enhance rural communities while ensuring that the importance of the countryside to our shared economic and social prosperity continues to grow.

Collectively, communities can be undermined by the loss of key services, including village schools, shops and pubs, post offices and small hospitals. Centralised or regionalised policy-making, driven by the instinct to rationalise or consolidate provision, militates against local service provision. The loss of such services not only affects the long-term viability of a community, but also directly impacts upon the quality of life of its residents

The planning system too often discriminates against rural communities. Planners are hidebound by guiding principles, such as the percentage of development which must be delivered on brown-field land, restricting development to locations serviced by public transport, and the exclusive focus on ‘growth centres’ as locations for development. These all mean that most rural centres (including many market towns) are denied the opportunity to respond to changing circumstances. As a result their functionality is compromised, they become unbalanced and unsustainable.

We agree with the need for change and indeed support the views of the recently formed Rural Coalition in their publication “The Future is Rural Too”¹. The publication notes the following:-

“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, homogenous 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 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 Rural Coalition; “The Future is Rural Too”; October 2009; www.daelnet.co.uk

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We also support the views of the CarnegieUK Trust in its recently published “Manifesto for Rural Communities”. In particular we share the view that “there are **some services that are essential** and that should be available wherever people live. These include:-

- Infrastructure of utilities, even if provided ‘off-grid’, such as water supply, electricity, telephone and broadband connectivity.
- Access to affordable and healthy food.
- An accessible and flexible community meeting place within reasonable distance
- Access to primary level education.
- Access to benefits for those who are eligible
- Access to general health care suited to each stage of life
- Security and public safety – access to police and fire services.”

The Rural Services Network’s specific proposals as set out in this Rural Services Manifesto all aim to support the ethos set out above. Whilst our proposals are set out as discrete requirements we acknowledge, of course, the interplay and inter-relationship across them.

Across the plethora of public service provision the funding formulae have not recognised properly (in some cases not at all) the costs of providing services across rural areas. This leads to rural people paying more, getting less and having to pay more from their net disposable income to access services and where local incomes are considerably lower than in urban areas. This is an issue of short term equality and long term sustainability of rural communities which simply must be addressed despite the present financial climate.

3. SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

Service provision in rural areas

- We uphold our calls for funding formulae reform made in the Rural Manifesto 2005/2006 and our “Call for Action” consultation exercise of March 2008.
- The Rural Services Network also supports NAVCA (National Association for Voluntary and Community Action) in calling for the Government “to focus resources on areas where voluntary sector infrastructure is weakest or non-existent and use their resources to lever in local match funding” and The Citizens Advice Manifesto’s calls for; adequate incomes for all; decent affordable homes for all; accessible services for all; clear and enforceable rights for all; and fair markets for all”
- The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to expand the use of universal service obligations to all the services on which people rely, including universal service obligations for schooling, affordable housing, public transport, social care and healthcare. These commitments would contribute toward a comprehensive statement of minimum and universal service provision for all communities, knitting together the obligations incumbent upon the public and private sectors and the support the Third Sector can give and which is already frequently delivered by the Third sector
- The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to recognise that rural deprivation is often masked within areas of apparent rural affluence and therefore should use small area statistics and other tools to reveal those pockets of deprivation and employ relevant measures to ensure that the needs of individuals are met

Safeguarding and expanding rural proofing

- The Rural Services Network calls for rural proofing to be implemented from the start of the policy process and not only as a retrospective tool. Rural proofing should be a statutory requirement in policy development across all services
- The Rural Services Network also calls for rural proofing to be required to secure proportionate impact of policy across all rural areas, including remote and peripheral communities (and with a requirement for central Government to

meet the additional 'rural premium costs' associated with servicing such areas).

- The Rural Services Network further calls for rural proofing to be extended to the regional and sub-regional levels of Government.

Delivering growth to rural economies and communities

- The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to make small business rate relief more accessible and strongly consider increasing relief to 100% of the rate burden for a limited time.
- The Rural Services Network supports the Rural Shops Alliance in its call for the return of a national scheme to support rural shops, post offices and pubs (akin to the former Vital Villages Programme) combining specialist advice with modest match-funded grants for capital investment
- The Rural Services Network, for economic, social and environmental purposes, calls on the Government to enable local authorities to support small rural business through the implementation of a comprehensive local procurement strategy which requires the authority to use local providers (including Third Sector bodies which already make a significant contribution in rural areas) wherever possible and financially viable
- The Rural Services Network supports the recommendations of the Taylor Review and, once again, urges their swift implementation.
- The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to back cost-effective skills initiatives in land-based and environmental businesses. We also call on the Government to ensure that these small rural businesses do not miss out on existing grant schemes for which they should be eligible but are too often overlooked

The digital future in rural communities

- The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to ensure that the roll-out of a future-proofed digital infrastructure does not bypass rural areas in terms of implementation timetabling, speed (throughout the whole day), bandwidth, or reliability.
- The Rural Services Network calls on all levels of Government to encourage free or very low cost internet hubs in communal buildings such as the local school and/or post office, where practical through the partnerships already established between the First and Third sectors in this work

- The Rural Services Network calls on all levels of Government and regional development agencies to follow the lead of EEDA and run awareness campaigns in local communities to promote and educate on the benefits of computer technology and the internet.

Safe, reliable and affordable transport solutions

- *Where a local rail service provides better access to service centres than rural buses, concessionary fares scheme should be allowed on such rail lines., Community Transport schemes where separate fares are charged should similarly brought with the national statutory scheme and centrally funded*
- Carbon reduction is now high on the national agenda, and will only be achieved by modal shift to more environmentally sustainable modes. The Rural Services Network accepts that more bus routes cannot be the panacea for rural transport needs but Central Government funding is essential to enable local authorities, in partnership with the private sector, to think in terms of providing transport networks which must include demand responsive services to support mainstream bus services which should be further developed to help meet carbon reduction requirements
- The Rural Services Network joins the CfIT and the Commission for Rural Communities calling on the Government to initiate a TaxiPlus demonstration as soon as possible. Where TaxiPlus is not viable, the RSN calls on the Government to include as a priority the Third Sector, ideally in partnership with the private sector, in developing incentives and allowances which enable it to run and develop transport schemes which can be the only method of providing micro-level community transport in rural areas without the necessity for significant subsidy
- The Rural Services Network calls for the 40p mileage rate for volunteer drivers to be immediately re-evaluated so that these services are not subsidised by the individual driver or the voluntary sector.

The Rural Services Network supports the Government's proposal to reduce rural speed limits to 50mph. However, rather than a blanket reduction, we also encourage the Government to consider an "intelligent" road speed limit system which only reduces the speed limit in dangerous areas, *whilst ensuring enforcement of speed limits through rural villages.*

While we have tried to avoid calling for a direct increase in central Government funding wherever possible, the Rural Services Network sees no solution other than calling on the Government to increase significantly the level of funding for rural roads and produce a clear strategy for their upgrade and repair.

Safeguarding rural schools

- The Rural Services Network opposes the closure of rural schools except on educational grounds.
- In order to help protect local schools, the Rural Services Network strongly encourages all local communities to better utilise school buildings and other facilities by ensuring that they are used throughout the year and in the evenings, recognising that the Third sector is vital to this happening.
- The Rural Services Network calls on all interested parties to encourage, support and facilitate (including financial support to transition costs) voluntary co-operation/federation between nearby rural schools

Affordable housing in rural areas

- The Rural Services Network welcomes the Taylor Review and, once again, urges the swift implementation of its recommendations
- The Rural Services Network calls for the remit and responsibilities of parish councils to be made clearer and more robust in the planning process with a clear responsibility to support and promote the provision of affordable housing in their area to meet the needs of local people where need is established.
- The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to make more watertight and add clarity to section 106 agreements; ensuring that the provisions are acceptable to funders whilst also protecting the local need and affordability requirements.
- The Rural Services Network strongly supports the Rural Housing Enabler Service and calls on the Government to make the service more widely available by providing financial support
- The Rural Services Partnership calls on The Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) to apply a greater degree of flexibility in applying the requirements of the Code for Sustainable Homes in rural areas where the costs of compliance are very substantial. The HCA also needs to recognise that scheme costs are

higher in rural areas and should find better use of grant from within the total funds available to help meet those extra costs.

- The Rural Services Network calls on the government to make utility providers more accountable as they often cause unreasonable delays to rural schemes.
- The Rural Services Network repeats its call on the Government to ensure that lending institutions provide adequate funding to housing associations.
- The Rural Services Network supports the National Housing Federation's seven key actions needed to tackle the rural housing crisis

Health and social care in rural areas

- The Rural Services Network opposes the closure of local rural hospitals except on health safety grounds. Community Hospitals should be promoted and supported as a solution making a positive contribution to the health and care system in rural areas
- The Rural Services Network calls for the public funding (as is now the case in Scotland) of air ambulance services and for the Government to consider where these services might be expanded.
- The Rural Services Network supports the Institute of Rural Health's call for recognition that rural communities are diverse and different and that care provision therefore needs to be flexible, imaginative and require a very different, design, style and mode of delivery of health services. This will require attention to the way primary care teams are structured, the development of the role of the generic "rural health" worker and resources to implement appropriate and evidence- based telehealth initiatives
- The Rural Services Network calls for the establishment of more multi-use medical centres in rural areas providing a range of medical services. These could be configured as community outreach arms of local hospitals.
- The Rural Services Network calls for a stable statutory regulatory and financial framework in order to safeguard dispensing practices in rural areas
- The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to ensure that there remains an effective out-of-hours GP service in rural areas, essential to rural residents without access to private transport.

Overcoming rural fuel poverty

- The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to reach more rural homes with the warm front scheme and make more appropriate the methods of insulation.
- The Rural Services Network considers that local partnerships led by the local authorities should be funded by the Government from within existing national fuel poverty resources as the best and most focused means of addressing rural fuel poverty

Robust flood defences

- The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to institute a separate funding stream for rural flood defences and an end to a “one-size-fits-all approach to cost-benefit analysis.

4. THE RURALSERVICES MANIFESTO

4.1 SERVICE PROVISION IN RURAL AREAS

The funding formulae across the whole range of essential public services has for decades failed to recognise the additional costs associated with delivering services in sparsely populated areas. Furthermore, the situation is only getting worse for those living in rural areas as the demographic becomes older and the recession diminishes the tax revenues of local councils.

This has been a concern of the Rural Services Network for some time and we have tirelessly campaigned for funding formulae which distribute resources in a fairer way and which recognise the costs relating to population dispersal and settlement patterns (which our own research has indicated is, for some services, as much as 90% higher than the more built up parts within rural areas).

There is now a real fear among those living in rural areas that the fiscal situation in which Britain finds itself will only exacerbate an already untenable status quo. We cannot stress strongly enough that any across-the-board budget cuts which seek to take a set percentage from national budgets, will be severely detrimental for rural communities given their low starting point compared to more urban areas.

For instance, a 10% budget cut for all local councils across the board would be hard for those servicing more urban areas; but in sparsely populated areas this effect would be amplified ten-fold and services already strained by unbalanced funding formulae could be irreparably damaged and with discretionary (but nevertheless essential) services being withdrawn altogether.

We uphold our calls for funding formulae reform made in the Rural Manifesto 2005/2006 and our “Call for Action” consultation exercise of March 2008.

The Rural Services Network also supports NAVCA (National Association for Voluntary and Community Action) in calling for the Government “to focus resources on areas where voluntary sector infrastructure is weakest or nonexistent and use their resources to lever in local match funding” and The Citizens Advice Manifesto’s calls for; adequate incomes for all; decent affordable homes for all; accessible services for all; clear and enforceable rights for all; and fair markets for all”

We call on the Government to ensure that when it says there will be no increase in unfunded (by the Government) statutory duties, the proof of that is not just at the national level but at the local level where the cost burden of implementation has to be met.

However, rather than calling for specific changes to the funding formulae in this manifesto (other than reflecting the costs associated with population dispersal and settlement patterns), we want to see the Government go further to adopt a universal principle which better meets the new challenges that the economic climate and demographics have presented.

The Rural Services Network welcomed the publication of Digital Britain in June this year. We were particularly pleased to see the Government's pledge to set Universal Service Obligations for the provision of high speed broadband across Britain.

The Rural Services Network calls on the Government TO EXPAND THE USE OF UNIVERSAL SERVICE OBLIGATIONS TO ALL THE SERVICES ON WHICH PEOPLE RELY, including universal service obligations for schooling, affordable housing, public transport, social care and healthcare. These commitments would contribute toward a COMPREHENSIVE STATEMENT OF MINIMUM AND UNIVERSAL SERVICE PROVISION FOR ALL COMMUNITIES, knitting together the obligations incumbent upon the public and private sectors and the support the Third sector can give and which is already frequently delivered by the Third sector

The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to recognise that rural deprivation is often masked within areas of apparent rural affluence and therefore should use small area statistics and other tools to reveal those pockets of deprivation and employ relevant measures to ensure that the needs of individuals are met

We see considerable merit in the system of Community led planning, which we believe should be encouraged as a means of bringing local people, service providers, local authorities and third and private sector organizations together to concentrate on achieving shared local objectives.

4.2 SAFEGUARDING AND EXPANDING RURAL PROOFING

Rural proofing is a commitment made by the Government to ensure that all its domestic policies take account of rural circumstances and needs.

We strongly welcome the measures which have so far been taken to establish rural proofing as an important part of the policy making process. The measures so far taken in this regard are to be commended.

However, the implementation of rural proofing still needs to be taken further if it is to fulfil its potential.

The Rural Services Network calls for RURAL PROOFING TO BE IMPLEMENTED FROM THE START OF THE POLICY PROCESS and not only as a retrospective tool. Rural Proofing should be a STATUTORY REQUIREMENT in policy development ACROSS ALL SERVICES.

The Rural Services Network also calls for rural proofing to be required to SECURE PROPORTIONATE IMPACT of policy across all rural areas, including remote and peripheral communities (and with a REQUIREMENT FOR CENTRAL GOVERNMENT TO MEET THE ADDITIONAL “RURAL PREMIUM COSTS” associated with servicing such areas)

The current situation whereby rural proofing is often applied retrospectively has been widely criticised. By ensuring policy makers are considering the impact on rural proofing from the outset, it is expected that fewer inappropriate, unenforceable and “urban-centric” policies will come from Whitehall.

We also expect that the continued prominence of rural proofing in the policy process, particularly where it is applied from the outset, will contribute overtime to a change in attitude among policy makers who will come to see the measure as integral to the policy process and not something which is viewed as an add-on or an afterthought.

The Rural Services Network further calls for RURAL PROOFING TO BE EXTENDED TO THE REGIONAL AND SUB-REGIONAL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

While the progress of rural proofing has been good, it is essential that these measures are extended beyond Whitehall. There is currently a feeling that the target driven environment at the regional level too often leads local bodies to have a focus on urban centres in their locality. Ensuring rural proofing is effective at this level is also very important.

4.3 DELIVERING GROWTH TO RURAL ECONOMIES AND COMMUNITIES

It is the RSN's view is that there is a distinctive set of issues that have an impact on the rural economy, and which require special attention. This is especially true given the gap which exists between the rural and urban economies. At present, people who work in rural areas earn significant less than those living in urban centres. On average, the discrepancy between earnings is over £7,000 per year.²

The Government must commit itself to finding ways to close this gap and while the health of rural economies is contingent upon a plethora of factors, many of which are addressed separately in this manifesto, there are certain issues which the Government must address to ensure economic growth and prosperity.

The financial crisis has demonstrated that an economy cannot rely too heavily on one sector alone. The job of the next Government will be to rebalance the economy away from financial services. As it does so, the Rural Services Network will stress the importance of rural proofing at every stage of the process. The Government must consider how schemes to invigorate the economy can meet their maximum potential in rural areas and secure proportionate impact in those areas.

For the health of rural economies, it is also vital that policy makers, at every level, appreciate the importance of small rural business; not just to the local economy, but to the local community as well. As will be mentioned later in this document, a network of small shops, village pubs and post offices are crucial for rural areas if communities are to be supported. In the same vein, town centres and market towns are the hub of rural life and vibrant town centres contribute toward the health and cohesion of rural communities.

In England, rural shops are closing at the rate of 400 – 500 per year, hit by a combination of rising costs, lack of credit and falling margins. Village pubs are being closed at a frightening rate and post offices remain under extreme threat –

Department for Communities and Local Government, "Living Working Countryside: The Taylor Review of Rural Economy and Affordable Housing"; July 2008, p.8; www.communities.gov.uk

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the current business model is viewed by the Rural Shops Alliance as being progressively less viable as Post Office Limited extend their essential and outreach models, both of which curtail the income available to the operator

For this reason, and to reflect the special burden which rural business face, the Rural Services Network calls on the Government to MAKE SMALL BUSINESS RATE RELIEF MORE ACCESSIBLE AND STRONGLY CONSIDER INCREASING RELIEF TO 100% OF THE RATE BURDEN FOR A LIMITED TIME. We join other organisation, notably the Federation for Small Businesses (FSB), in urging the Treasury to consider “topping-up” local council funding in order to provide 100% rate relief funded from Treasury reserves. In addition, all small businesses should be automatically eligible for relief without having to go through an application process.

The Rural Services Network supports the Rural Shops Alliance in its call for the return of a national scheme to support rural shops, post offices and pubs (akin to the former Vital Villages Programme) combining specialist advice with modest match-funded grants for capital investment

The Rural Services Network, for economic, social and environmental purposes, calls on the Government to enable local authorities to support small rural business through THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A COMPREHENSIVE LOCAL PROCUREMENT STRATEGY which require the authority to use local providers (including Third Sector bodies which already make a significant contribution in rural areas) wherever possible and financially viable

Investment in enterprise, innovation and skills should be made across England. In particular, the provision of locally accessible, relevant vocational skills training and support for the development of young people (post- 16) is critical to the maintenance of robust communities.

The (unfunded) cost of travel to and from further education acts as a strong deterrent to young people to develop their skills. This is compounded by the significant additional time commitment to cover travelling and combine to create a real barrier to participation. This situation is being aggravated by the rationalisation and concentration of FE provision into urban centres. Equally, people of all ages from remote rural communities wishing to enter and progress through the labour market are facing the additional challenge of a steady reduction in the locality of Job Centre Plus offices.

Where they have operated Wheels to work schemes have proved to be very successful in providing access to employment and training for young people. There needs to be consistent and coherent funding for such schemes which should not have to rely on short term project funding.

A further block to rural economic development has been the lack of premises available to use as office space or small manufacturing spaces. There are a number of ways this could be overcome, including easing the planning process in this regard, building mixed use developments with spaces for business, or allowing the conversion of unused buildings for business purposes.

The Rural Services Network supports the recommendations of the Taylor Review and, once again, urges its swift implementation.

We also recognise that out-of-town supermarkets and retail parks can have a detrimental impact on rural small business and act as a centripetal force on rural communities.

Food security is an important strategic objective for the United Kingdom and agriculture remains an important employment sector in rural areas. More emphasis needs to be given to the public sector's role in helping these key sectors face the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead - linked to which is the integrated land management agenda and competing pressures on land use. Already rural areas are suffering from a critical shortage of skilled farm workers and growers which if unaddressed, will seriously impact upon Britain's ability to produce enough food for the nation.

With 41% of the total agricultural workforce over 50 years of age, urgent action is needed to attract the workforce into the agricultural sector. The current skills shortage is now so severe that Lantra, the Sector Skills Council working for environmental and land-based industries, has estimated that 60,000 new entrants to the sector will be needed over the next decade to replenish the retiring workforce.

The Rural Services Network calls on the government to BACK COST-EFFECTIVE SKILLS INITIATIVES IN LAND-BASED AND ENVIRONMENTAL BUSINESSES. We further call on the government to ensure that these small rural businesses do not miss out on existing grant schemes for which they should be applicable but are too often overlooked.

The LandSkills programme, co-funded by employers and EU funds through the Rural Development Plan for England, is highly successful and serves as a useful case study. The programme's strength is that it links skills development with business support; this approach should be replicated in the mainstream.

There needs to be a stronger emphasis on the role of rural areas in mitigating and adapting to climate change and associated economic opportunities.

The Rural Services Network remains concerned that national policy priorities do not reflect the needs of market towns. Much more attention at both national and regional policy level should be given to market towns considering the economic role that rural centres play

4.4 THE DIGITAL FUTURE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Alongside the measures noted above, ensuring that rural areas have access to a fast and reliable broadband connection will be absolutely vital to the countryside's long-term economic future.

There remains a digital divide between rural and urban areas, and there is a case for allocating the resources unspent by BT in facilitating the digital switchover towards the enabling of broadband services in rural areas.

The Government has for the most part left the proliferation of digital infrastructure to the private service provider. As such, there is a real danger that broadband infrastructure will be laid where it is profitable first, and then where it is most needed second (if at all).

The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to ENSURE THE ROLL-OUT OF A FUTURE-PROOFED DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE DOES NOT BYPASS RURAL AREAS in terms of implementation timetabling, speed (throughout the whole day), bandwidth or reliability.

The importance of internet access to the rural communities should not be underestimated and we will be looking to engage with Internet Service Providers (ISP) on this issue.

Until rural broadband access is greatly improved, we also see the provision of community internet hubs as a useful way of partially bridging the digital divide. For most people in Britain, the internet is the natural place to go for job applications, extra-curricular or adult learning, education and social networking. By providing internet hubs in existing communal buildings such as schools and post offices, people in rural areas can get access to the internet while strengthening their own communities and safeguarding communal spaces. This is another issue where the role of the ISP's will be crucial in achieving success

The Rural Services Network calls on all levels of Government to ENCOURAGE FREE OR VERY LOW COST INTERNET HUBS IN COMMUNAL BUILDINGS SUCH AS THE LOCAL SCHOOL AND/OR POST OFFICE, where practicable through partnerships already established between the First and Third sectors in this work

However, alongside the lack of infrastructure, there is another block on access which threatens to keep the digital divide wide even after broadband is delivered. In rural areas, there is a lack of awareness of how the internet can be used, particularly where business are involved.

We have been extremely impressed by the TakeITon campaign launched by the East of England Development Agency which sought to increase the awareness of local business on how to harness IT for business growth.

The Rural Services Network calls on all levels of Government and regional development agencies to follow the lead of EEDA and RUN AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES TO PROMOTE AND EDUCATE ON THE BENEFITS OF COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY AND THE INTERNET.

4.5 SAFE, RELIABLE AND AFFORDABLE TRANSPORT SOLUTIONS

Safe, reliable and affordable transport links are vital for the economy and rural communities across England. The two issues requiring urgent redress are the availability of public transport solutions in rural areas and the safety of rural roads.

The Government is unlikely to reach its own target for 2010 of increasing by one third the number of households in rural areas who live within walking distance of an at least hourly bus service. This is in no small part due to the recession, which has damaged the commercial service providers and threatens to reduce budgets at local authority level leaving fewer resources for rural transport links.

While it might be unrealistic to call for more bus routes in rural areas, there is still scope to improve the skeleton service which already exists.

Where a local rail service provides better access to service centres than rural buses, CONCESSIONARY FARES SHOULD BE ALLOWED on such rail lines. Community Transport schemes where separate fares are charged should be brought within the national statutory scheme.

Carbon reduction is now high on the national agenda, and will only be achieved by modal shift to more environmentally sustainable modes. We accept that more bus routes cannot be the panacea for rural transport needs but Central Government funding is essential to enable local authorities, in partnership with the private sector, to think in terms of providing transport networks which must include demand responsive services to support mainstream bus services which should be further developed to help meet carbon reduction requirements. The Commission for Integrated Transport recently released an excellent report into how rural transport challenges are overcome on the continent using these measures.³

The Rural Services Network joins the CfIT and the Commission for Rural Communities calling on the Government to INITIATE A TAXIPLUS DEMONSTRATION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. Where TaxiPlus is not viable, the RSN calls on the Government to include as a priority the Third Sector, ideally in partnership with the private sector, in developing incentives and allowances which enable it to run and develop transport schemes which can be the only method of providing micro-level community transport in rural areas without the necessity for significant subsidy

The Rural Services Network calls for the 40p mileage rate for volunteer drivers to be immediately re-evaluated so that these services are not subsidised by the individual driver or the voluntary sector.

Road safety is also another crucial issue affecting rural communities. On average, nine people die on Britain's roads everyday, and of this total, six are killed on rural roads.⁴ In order to overcome this problem, the Government must take action to curb speed limits and improve road quality.

Commission for Integrated Transport; "A New Approach to Rural Public Transport"; November 2008;

www.cfit.gov.uk

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IAM Motoring Trust; "Rural Roads – The Biggest Killer"; Institute of Advanced Motorists, p.2;

www.iam.org.uk

The Rural Services Network supports the Government's proposal to REDUCE RURAL SPEED LIMITS TO 50MPH. However, rather than a blanket reduction, we also encourage the Government to consider an "intelligent" road speed limit system which only reduces the speed limit in dangerous areas whilst ensuring enforcement of speed limits through rural villages.

While we have tried to avoid calling for a direct increase in central Government funding wherever possible, the Rural Services Network sees no solution other than calling on the Government to INCREASE SIGNIFICANTLY THE LEVEL OF FUNDING FOR RURAL ROADS AND PRODUCE A CLEAR STRATEGY FOR THEIR UPGRADE AND REPAIR.

4.6 SAFEGUARDING RURAL SCHOOLS

Rural schools have a reputation of being among the best in the country, not only by the simplistic urban orientated measures used by Ofsted, but also due to the high level of parent involvement, small class sizes, and their role at the centre of rural communities.

We are greatly concerned by the heavy handed centralisation that comes from Whitehall; particularly where inappropriate target-driving teaching is concerned and the method of pupil unit costs figures currently employed to gauge a school's economic viability. The funding formula for rural schools is woefully inadequate and the RSN supports the work of the F40 group of local authorities.

Rural schools are at the heart of rural communal life, and we believe that is where they should stay. Rather than be threatened by closure, the way in which rural communities engage with their schools should become a national model to which urban schools aspire.

The Rural Services Network OPPOSES THE CLOSURE OF RURAL SCHOOLS EXCEPT ON EDUCATIONAL GROUNDS

When considering the closure of rural schools, it is imperative that local authorities and central Government recognise in their financial appraisal the hidden costs. These include the provision of transport to schools which are further away, the cost to the environment which this brings, and the loss of parental involvement in their children's education.

In order to help protect local schools, the Rural Services Network strongly encourages all local communities to BETTER UTILISE SCHOOL BUILDINGS AND OTHER FACILITIES BY ENSURING THAT THEY ARE USED THROUGHOUT THE YEAR AND IN THE EVENINGS recognising that the Third sector is vital to this happening.

Rural school buildings are a valuable community asset and should be utilised as widely as possible. Among other things, school buildings can be used as internet hubs in the evening and centres for adult study or sports courses and events throughout the summer months.

The Rural Services Network calls on all interested parties to encourage support and facilitate (including financial support to transition costs) voluntary co-operation/federation between nearby rural schools

However, the solution to many of the problems faced by rural schools lies in increasing the attractiveness of rural areas to young families. Only by stopping the ageing of the countryside and removing the prejudices as to its demographics, will rural schools have a real future.

4.7 AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN RURAL AREAS

The most crucial measure to both retain and bring young people and families to rural areas is the provision of affordable housing. The lower wages of rural people and the higher house prices due to the prevalence of holiday homes is a particular issue for rural communities.

The Rural Services Network welcomes the Taylor Review and, once again, urges the swift implementation of its recommendations.

However, despite the positive impact of the Review, there is more that needs to be done to ensure that this vital need is met.

Incentives are needed for landowners to offer land for affordable housing to meet the needs of local people.

One measure which will greatly improve the provision of affordable housing is taking the decision-making process as close to communities as possible. Empowering local communities is a commitment to which all political parties have subscribed. Local people have the best understanding of local needs, fears, and aspirations. For this reason, we believe that there should be a greater and more clearly defined role for parish councils in the planning process for affordable homes.

The Rural Services Network calls for THE REMIT AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF PARISH COUNCILS TO BE MADE CLEARER AND MORE ROBUST IN THE PLANNING PROCESS WITH A CLEAR RESPONSIBILITY TO SUPPORT AND PROMOTE THE PROVISION OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING in their area TO MEET THE NEEDS OF LOCAL PEOPLE where need is established.

Two ways which parish councils can contribute to the delivery of affordable housing is through the assessment of housing need and through the incentivising of affordable housing at the Parish Council level.

Parish councils know their communities best of all and consequently should aid local housing authorities in producing an assessment of housing need across their parish on a regular basis (for example, every 4-5 years). This assessment should be published and available to the public to inform local stakeholders.

There is also a case for parish councils to benefit from the Planning and Housing Delivery Grant. If the grant provided a financial incentive to parish councils, the cause of affordable housing would be greatly advanced. However, on the technical side, shortfalls do still exist.

The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to MAKE MORE WATERTIGHT AND ADD CLARITY TO SECTION 106 AGREEMENTS ensuring that the provisions are acceptable to funders whilst also protecting the local need and affordability requirements.

Through our membership, we have also learnt of the positive role which the Rural Housing Enabler Service is having on the provision of affordable rural homes. This service provides expert advice and an independent arbitrator between parties.

The Rural Services Network STRONGLY SUPPORTS THE RURAL HOUSING ENABLER SERVICE AND CALLS ON THE GOVERNMENT TO MAKE THE SERVICE MORE WIDELY AVAILABLE BY PROVIDING FINANCIAL SUPPORT

The Rural Services Network calls on The Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) to APPLY A GREATER DEGREE OF FLEXIBILITY in applying the requirements of the Code for Sustainable Homes in rural areas where the costs of compliance are very substantial. The HCA also needs to recognise that SCHEME COSTS ARE HIGHER IN RURAL AREAS and should find better use of grant from within the total funds available to help meet those extra costs.

The Rural Services Network calls on the government TO MAKE UTILITY PROVIDERS MORE ACCOUNTABLE as they often cause unreasonable delays to rural schemes.

Finally, a problem remains where funding allocation is concerned. The lack of development finance puts an unnecessary block on progress which could be easily avoided.

The Rural Services Network repeats its call on the Government to ENSURE THAT LENDING INSTITUTIONS PROVIDE ADEQUATE FUNDING TO HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS.

The Rural Services Network supports the National Housing Federation's seven key actions needed to tackle the rural housing crisis, namely:-

- More public investment
- More effective planning
- Securing mixed communities
- Better use of existing buildings
- Achieving high design and environmental standards
- Restricting the right to buy
- More social rented homes

4.8 HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE IN RURAL AREAS

The provision of health and social care in rural areas presents unique challenges. This is due to an older, less mobile and more dispersed population with higher than average health and social care needs. Despite this, per capita NHS funding fails to recognise the additional costs associated with rural areas and as a consequence PCT's serving rural populations have tended to experience the greatest difficulties balancing their budgets

Furthermore, 'distance decay', is becoming more prevalent. People make decreasing use of healthcare services the further they are away from the location of the provision, with consequently worse health outcomes. This is exacerbated by a trend towards increasing centralisation of acute services on cost grounds, lack of transport denying access for older people in the countryside, and financial pressures to reduce remote service delivery.

Consequently, the Rural Services Network OPPOSES THE CLOSURE OF LOCAL RURAL HOSPITALS EXCEPT ON HEALTH SAFETY GROUNDS. Community Hospitals should be promoted and supported as a solution making a positive contribution to the health and care system in rural areas

We recognise the essential role which voluntary community organisations currently have in the provision of healthcare, especially where emergency support is concerned. However, this is hampered by poor mobile phone coverage and mobile internet access. We therefore reinforce our earlier calls for increased broadband proliferation and the removal of mobile phone 'not spots'.

We also recognise the essential difference to rural communities made by air ambulance services in saving lives.

The Rural Services Network calls for the PUBLIC FUNDING (as is now the case in Scotland) OF AIR AMBULANCE SERVICES AND FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO CONSIDER WHERE THESE SERVICES MIGHT BE EXPANDED.

One of the biggest barriers to accessible healthcare in the countryside is the poor transport links which currently exist between rural communities, their nearest hospital and GP surgery. Partnerships with the Third sector should be sought to help address these issues

The Rural Services Network supports the Institute of Rural Health's call for recognition that rural communities are diverse and different and that care provision therefore needs to be flexible, imaginative and require a very different, design, style and mode of delivery of health services. This will require attention to the way primary care teams are structured, the development of the role of the generic "rural health" worker and resources to implement appropriate and evidence- based telehealth initiatives

We also feel that the current situation, whereby rural people often need to make numerous long-distance journeys for one medical problem, is unacceptable. It is hard enough for a rural patient to just visit a hospital or doctor's surgery without then having to travel further for medication and other services needed.

On this point, it is essential that authorities look to establish more multi-use medical centres in rural areas and safeguard dispensing practices which allow patients to collect their prescriptions from the doctors' surgery in one trip. Dispensing practices use the income they receive from dispensing to invest in additional services including extra staff, transport schemes, branch surgeries and near-patient clinics that make possible safe and convenient access to primary care in remote areas.

The Rural Services Network calls for the establishment of MORE MULTI-USE MEDICAL CENTRES IN RURAL AREAS PROVIDING A RANGE OF MEDICAL SERVICES. These could be configured as community outreach arms of local hospitals

The Rural Services Network calls for a stable, regulatory and financial framework in order to SAFEGUARD DISPENSING PRACTICES IN RURAL AREAS

The Rural Services Network further calls on the Government to ENSURE THAT THERE REMAINS AN EFFECTIVE OUT-OF-HOURS GP SERVICE IN RURAL AREAS, essential to rural residents without access to private transport.

The current direction for adult care is for the use of direct payments to the end user to choose their providers in care. This may work well in urban areas where there is a choice of providers. This is not the case in sparsely populated areas where the whole “choice agenda” is just a theory because in practice realistic choice simply does not exist. Additional funding should be directed to attract these providers to deliver a competitive service. Funding should come from reduced health and care home expenditure

4.9 OVERCOMING RURAL FUEL POVERTY

Many rural customers are not connected to the gas network and so currently get a raw deal as they are reliant on more expensive electricity, domestic heating oil or liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). Furthermore, there are more solid wall homes in rural areas which are more difficult and costly to make energy efficient.

The consequence of this is high energy bills and often high carbon emissions in rural areas. It is certainly a sad and sorry situation when people in rural areas cannot afford to heat their homes and consequently need NHS services more frequently.

However, we believe that the issues of fuel poverty and the high carbon footprint of rural areas can be solved together.

Initially, the Government must do more to reach fuel poor rural households with its warm front scheme. Although rural homes are often harder to insulate, it is in rural areas where a significant amount of fuel poverty is strongly felt.

The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to REACH MORE RURAL HOMES WITH THE WARM FRONT SCHEME AND MAKE MORE APPROPRIATE THE METHODS OF INSULATION .

Furthermore, the Rural Services Network considers that LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS led by the local authorities SHOULD BE FUNDED BY THE GOVERNMENT FROM WITHIN EXISTING NATIONAL FUEL POVERTY RESOURCES as the best and most focused means of addressing rural fuel poverty

While insulation is a problem which must be overcome, the central issue remains the expensive means by which rural homes not connected to the gas mains consume energy. However, with the future of the gas supply to Great Britain uncertain, we believe that carbon neutral, renewable energy generation can, alongside improving the energy efficiency of the rural housing stock, be the answer to rural fuel poverty.

4.10 ROBUST FLOOD AND COASTAL DEFENCES

During our consultation exercise for this manifesto our attention was brought to the current inequalities in the provision of flood defences in rural areas. The current cost-benefit analysis is heavily skewed in favour of urban areas due to the “one-size fits all” approach used by the Environment Agency.

As a consequence, some rural areas which have flooded numerous times over the last years are unlikely to ever see Government funded flood defences given the small pot available and the biased approach taken.

The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to INSTITUTE A SEPARATE FUNDING STREAM FOR RURAL FLOOD DEFENCES AND AN END TO A “ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL” APPROACH TO COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS.

We would like to thank Pickering Flood Defence for bringing this issue so forcefully to our attention.

Coastal Defence issues will be of major importance to be addressed through national resources