

"DO OR DIE" CHALLENGE FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES

Britain's rural villages are at risk of dying unless radical action is taken to secure their future, it is being warned.

A newly formed Rural Coalition, made up of leading organisations which represent rural interests, is calling on the Government to deliver on its Big Society vision by radically empowering local people to shape the rural places in which they live. They are warning that without this action, rural services face meltdown as spending is cut, housing will outprice all but the wealthiest, and rural wages will continue to lag as much as 20% behind urban averages

Today the Rural Coalition publishes The Rural Challenge, a report outlining detailed proposals to give local people, entrepreneurs, community groups and councils the ability to bring about positive change that will ensure a thriving future for the countryside. The report is being billed as a blueprint for delivering the Big Society in the small places which are at huge risk unless action is taken now.

The Rural Challenge report sets out detailed propositions for taking on five key challenges facing the countryside – meeting rural housing need, building thriving economies, delivering good rural services, creating flourishing market towns and empowering local communities. The Rural Coalition, chaired by Lord Taylor of Goss Moor, believes this can be achieved by letting communities seize the initiative.

Key recommendations of the report include:

- Urging the Government to give greater independence to local residents and councils to ensure that rural communities can continue to live and work, and therefore be the foundation of a beautiful and living countryside with a secure long-term economic future.
- Scrapping plans for referendums in the Government's Community Right to Build scheme which would require 90% community support before new, small scale development can go ahead in villages. The coalition says the requirement could wreck the aim of the Government's proposals and create long lasting conflict within communities which brings local development to a halt. Instead, elected parish councils, empowered by a community-led plan, should be able to initiate small community-led developments, within a reinvigorated and localised planning system designed to meet local needs in keeping with the area.
- That town hall planners, local councils and communities should be free to come up with innovative solutions to the rural affordable housing crisis. By reforming the Housing Revenue Account and allowing councils to keep money from selling council homes, local authorities will be freed to help address the urgent need for new housing for young families and low-income households in rural areas.
- A call for the Government to take proper account of the impact of public sector funding cuts on rural areas before finalising the Comprehensive Spending Review in October. By allowing communities to share some of the savings the Government makes to public spending on services, communities would be empowered to develop innovative local alternatives through community provision - including community ownership of shops, Post Offices, pubs, broadband hubs, sustainable energy and local community transport.
- Pressing for a radical transformation of planning practice to give communities the lead in planning for thriving and sustainable new neighbourhoods when market towns need to grow. Too often market towns in urban areas have been ringed with endless suburban style housing estates and business parks, without any sense of rural identity.

The coalition is made up of, and supported by, an unprecedented range of bodies from the private,

public and charity sector.

Chairman Matthew Taylor, who authored the Taylor Review of affordable housing and rural economies in 2008, said:

“On its current course, with no change in policy and no commitment to action, much of the countryside is becoming part dormitory, part theme park and part retirement home.

“We need a fundamental change of approach at both national and local levels to give rural communities a more sustainable future. The rural coalition believes the Government's commitment to localism and the Big Society opens the door to those reforms - but as yet there is a very real risk that in practice cuts will fall heaviest in rural communities which may lose services altogether, and opportunities will be missed to make rural communities prosper.

“For 50 years or more, policy has undervalued the countryside and failed to meet the needs of rural communities. The result is starkly apparent: rural communities have become increasingly less sustainable and less self-sufficient. Today we publish a blueprint for the Big Society in small places - if the Government is serious about localism, it should rise to the challenge.”

A copy of the report ‘The Rural Challenge: achieving sustainable rural communities for the 21st century’ can be found at: www.local.gov.uk from Monday, August 16.

The Rural Coalition is made up of Action with Communities in Rural England, the Campaign to Protect Rural England, the Country Land & Business Association, the Local Government Association, The Royal Town Planning Institute and the Town & Country Planning Association.

The Rural Coalition was facilitated and advised by the Commission for Rural Communities, with additional help and support from the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, Action for Market Towns, the Rural Services Network, Carnegie UK Trust, the Plunkett Foundation, English Heritage, the National Association of Local Councils, the National Housing Federation, and the English National Parks Association.

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QUOTES

The Local Government Association’s Rural Commission Chairman, Cllr Andrew Bowles, said: “The proportion of affordable homes in rural areas is little more than half that in urban communities. If young families and low-income households are not able to access housing in villages, services like schools, buses and Post Offices become even less viable. Councils have long been calling for greater autonomy and freedom to manage the finances of their own housing. This will free them up to meet the unique needs and aspirations of the areas and people they are elected to represent.”

Campaign to Protect Rural England Chief Executive Shaun Spiers said: “The Rural Challenge calls for action now to ensure that our countryside continues to thrive into the future, a living countryside with its beauty and tranquillity soundly protected. Central to this is a reinvigorated planning system, in which local communities and councils are empowered to shape their neighbourhoods. CPRE looks forward to playing its part in ensuring such a positive future for the countryside.”

Country Land & Business Association Vice-President Henry Robinson said: “The needs of rural communities for better jobs, housing, transport, services and leisure are similar to those in urban areas. Yet many in the countryside feel they are not receiving the benefits of national economic growth, and that Government does not fully understand the relationship between rural businesses, rural life and the environment.

“Some rural communities have become unsustainable because of a negative approach to development. The planning system has been used as a brake on appropriate and much-needed development in the countryside in the misplaced belief that this supports communities and the environment.”

Action with Communities in Rural England Chief Executive Sylvia Brown, said “Rural communities already demonstrate ‘the Big Society’ in action, but with a supportive context set by central and local government, they can and will do far more to respond to new opportunities. We are pleased to see the Coalition’s backing for using the principles of Community led Planning to help local people decide on how they can better meet their aspirations.

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