

Press Release from Rural Services Network

Rural services providers call on Government to seize opportunity to end “rural mainstreaming”

Rural services providers and community organisations across England are today calling on the Government to produce an urgent comprehensive strategy for rural areas in preparation for Brexit, in light of a warning that people living in our towns and villages “simply cannot afford to wait any longer for politicians to take their concerns seriously and act on them”.

The call is the result of concern that deep-seated challenges to the sustainability of rural communities and service delivery in rural areas have been inadequately addressed by those in power for too long and the situation has become urgent. The significant outflow of people from rural areas to urban-based jobs continues to be a source of concern, like the prevailing sense that the potential of rural areas is being squandered, despite projections that unlocking their digital potential could add at least £12bn of extra productivity each year to the UK economy. Fuelling concern further is the fear that the UK’s exit from the EU will serve to compound these existing challenges, and others, not least as in many respects the current model is heavily reliant on EU policies and funding streams.

Leading the charge, membership organisation Rural Services Network said after years of an inadequate rural policy framework exacerbated by public sector austerity and, the Government must produce a new strategy for rural areas which ensures existing mainstream policies work for these towns and villages, addresses brain drain, improves infrastructure and transport links, and raises the opportunities and challenges facing rural areas up the political agenda ahead of the next spending review.

“Rural Communities are frequently overlooked in a policy environment dominated by urban thinking and policy concerns. This often means communities either miss out on the benefits or experience unintended consequences from policies which are poorly thought-through from a rural perspective. It is time for this ‘rural mainstreaming’ to stop. People living in our towns and villages simply cannot afford to wait any longer for politicians to take their concerns seriously and act on them,” **said Rural Services Network chief executive, Graham Biggs.**

“If rural communities are to be sustainable, the Government must seize this opportunity to work with communities to produce a long-term, funded rural strategy which recognises the contribution rural areas make and have the potential to make to the wellbeing and prosperity of the nation as a whole.”

17 per cent (9.4 million) of England’s population live in rural areas – that is more people than in Greater London receiving less grant per head than urban areas, despite the fact that it costs more to provide their services. For example, in 2018/19 urban authorities will receive 49.43 per cent (£123) per head in Settlement Funding Assessment grant more than their rural counterparts.

In acknowledgement of the numerous challenges faced by rural areas, the Rural Services Network has produced a report identifying several priority areas for a new Government Rural Strategy and the issues they must address. These include:

- **EU support & funding:** In 2020, sources of funding which support rural businesses and community development from EU initiatives will end. A new Rural Strategy must provide rural businesses with the support they need to create thriving local economies.
- **Broadband connectivity:** In England’s rural areas 15 per cent of premises are unable to access broadband connection with the speed regulator, Ofcom, considers necessary for everyday online tasks. A new Rural Strategy must ensure all rural

households and businesses have the option of reliable access to broadband and mobile networks.

- Brain drain: There is a significant outflow of people from rural areas to urban-based jobs. A new Rural Strategy must ensure opportunities for quality jobs, skills and training are available so young people can remain local.
- Housing: House prices are, on average, £44,000 higher in rural areas than urban areas. But the median average earnings for rural employment are £21,400, 10 per cent less than England's average which stands at £23,700.
- Transport: During 2016/17 alone, 202 bus services were withdrawn altogether in shire areas. People of all ages must have the means to travel to services, jobs and for social purposes.
- Health: Rural and urban areas receive similar funding (per resident) under the NHS allocations to CCGs, but this does not reflect the older rural demographic, which places extra demand on NHS services.

Speaking in support of the RSN's report, The Bishop of Ely, Stephen Conway, the Church of England's lead Bishop for Education, who has previously called for a rural strategy, said:

"We welcome the Rural Services Network's report, and echo its call for a cross-Government rural strategy.

"The Church of England is at the heart of rural communities with around two thirds of our 16,000 churches in rural areas, and half of our 4,700 schools found in the countryside. Where the post office, the pub and shop have disappeared, these are often the only community focus left, and are crucial to the identity and wellbeing of villages and rural areas.

"We are committed to helping rural communities flourish through our churches and schools, but this requires fit-for-purpose infrastructure, transport, job opportunities and the other vital services for which this report calls."