

The future is rural too

The Rural Coalition:



The Rural Coalition includes:

- Action with Communities in Rural England
- Campaign to Protect Rural England
- Country Land and Business Association
- Local Government Association Group
- Royal Town Planning Institute
- Town and Country Planning Association

The need for change

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 plans outlined here 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.

Vibrant villages

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.

Thriving economies

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.

Flourishing towns

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.

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Great local services

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.

Empowering communities

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.

Act now

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.

This prospectus sets out in brief our shared view of what needs to change. Next year, as Britain emerges from the credit crunch, and a newly elected Government comes to office, we will set out in more detail our proposals for policy and practical changes.

We want your organisations' help in setting this new agenda for the countryside to meet the challenges of the 21st century. We need your help to do it. Tell us now what your organisation thinks. Show us what already works in your community. Help us shape the future for rural England.

If your organisation wishes to get involved contact:
ruralcoalition@ruralcoalition.org.uk

The Rural Coalition is comprised of:



The coalition has been advised by CRC and CABE, and is chaired by Matthew Taylor, author of 'Living Working Countryside'.



Commission for
Rural Communities
Tackling rural disadvantage



The government's advisor
on architecture, urban design
and public space

The views expressed in the prospectus do not necessarily represent the policy position of the CRC
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