An aerial photograph of a coastal village. In the foreground, there are purple flowers. The middle ground shows a golf course, a cluster of houses, a tennis court, and a beach with a building. The background is a steep, grassy hillside with a white cliff face on the right.

GREEN AND PLEASANT

REBUILDING RURAL BRITAIN

*Edited by Ben Cooper and Iggy Wood, with a foreword
by Jim McMahon MP and contributions from Silviya Barrett,
Nick Thomas-Symonds MP, Colin Smyth MSP, Catherine Fookes and more*

FOREWORD



Jim McMahon is the Labour MP for Oldham West and Royton and the shadow secretary of state for environment, food, and rural affairs

BRITAIN IS ONE of the most centralised states in Europe. The Tories have used this power to build a low growth economy that uses the talents of too few people in too few places.

Every part of the UK, including our rural and coastal communities, needs a Labour government that will spread power, wealth and opportunity far and wide. And that's exactly what we will do.

The various wings of the Tory party are fundamentally divided on housebuilding, food security, fracking, trade, and infrastructure, and the constant factional power struggles of the past six years have left farming communities with no certainty for the future. Reforms of land use, subsidies, and development are here today and gone tomorrow – or, even worse, left in planning for a few expensive years and then ignominiously scrapped. These issues are exacerbated by a weak prime minister, repeatedly forced to U-turn by backbenchers holding him to ransom.

Tory failures on the NHS are catastrophic for people living in coastal and rural areas. Recent data has shown that patients in some rural areas are waiting almost three times longer for ambulances than those in towns and cities.

The government talks about banning all petrol and diesel cars from 2030, but with no clear plan for how people who don't live in towns and cities will adapt, and scarcely a word about improving our threadbare public transport network. Coastal and rural communities have lost a quarter of their bus routes in the last decade.

Labour, in contrast, have set out a transformational vision for the whole of Great Britain. Rural and coastal communities play an essential role in our economy that is all too often overlooked, and one that's not limited to farming and tourism, as important as those sectors are. We want to help these communities, and we see them as key partners in solving issues that affect the whole nation.



A Fabian Society report
General secretary Andrew Harrop
Editorial director Kate Murray
Editorial assistant Iggy Wood

Like all publications of the Fabian Society, this report represents not the collective views of the society, but only the views of the individual writers. The responsibility of the society is limited to approving its publications as worthy of consideration within the labour movement.

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Daniel Zeichner, our shadow food and farming minister, will set out our vision for farming and the countryside in a separate chapter; so I will limit myself to saying that we are absolutely determined to clean up the mess and confusion caused by three Defra secretaries of state in three months.

Labour's offer is fundamentally different from that of the Conservatives. The Tories want to lower standards and undercut British farmers, whereas Labour will back our farmers and food producers by putting food and farming standards into law. We'll grow the rural economy, cut carbon and restore nature at the same time.

In the past, Westminster and Whitehall have been accused of devising policy for urban areas and retrofitting it for rural communities. The next Labour government will not work like that. Keir Starmer recently set out plans for the biggest ever transfer of power from Westminster to the British people with radical plans for higher standards, wider devolution and better growth.

These bold, exciting proposals will spread power, wealth and opportunity to all parts of the UK, so that everyone can contribute to and benefit from Labour's plans for prosperity.

At the heart of all of this is one question: who do you trust to deliver for rural and coastal communities? A tired government that has offered nothing but division for 12 years, or a transformative Labour party, led by Keir Starmer?

I'm proud that across the shadow cabinet, Labour is offering our rural and coastal communities practical solutions to their problems. Over the summer, Lisa Nandy set out plans for a licensing scheme for holiday lets to preserve the spirit of coastal and rural communities. This system will ensure communities can reap the rewards of thriving tourism, ending the scourge of communities becoming ghost towns outside of the tourist season, particularly in Devon and Cornwall.

The Conservatives have seemingly accepted that people in coastal areas will be priced out of their own neighbourhoods whilst homes stand empty for months, but Labour has not.

This is yet another example of where the Tories have taken their traditional rural and coastal heartlands for granted. Labour has always been a party for every area across this great country. I have been proud in my role as shadow environment secretary to visit every corner and to fight for the shires and coastal communities.

I have seen the immense connection that communities have to the places where they live and their profound sense of identity. It's the thread that connects all the areas I have been to across our country where people want to have a real stake in the communities that they live; for them, their families, and their futures.

Unfortunately, in too many places, young people are often forced to leave the place where they were born and raised to get on in work or to get on the housing ladder.

It is only the Labour party that has the answers to the challenges facing so many people across the country. Only Labour has the economic, social and political answers that our rural and coastal communities have been asking for.

Labour is ready to govern for every part of our country, from our cities and towns to our villages and coastal areas, all in the national interest. **F**

Rebuilding rural Labour

Labour's path to power runs through rural communities. At the next election, Labour should be the 'party of the countryside' as part of a broad, one nation platform, writes *Ben Cooper*



Ben Cooper is a senior researcher at the Fabian Society

IN 2019, THE final few connections between Labour in parliament and rural communities snapped. According to YouGov's 2019 post-election survey, just 20 per cent of voters in rural Britain supported Labour – compared to 53 per cent who backed the Conservatives.

Today, no Labour MP represents a seat where a majority of voters live in rural communities – and Labour holds just 2 per cent of seats classified as 'village or smaller' (with a plurality of rural residents). The party currently represents a smaller share of rural Britain in Parliament than the SNP or Plaid Cymru.

This was part of a broader trend, which saw Labour's vote share increasingly concentrated in major cities – while struggling in towns, coastal communities, and especially rural areas.

But all is not lost. Labour has recovered its reputation since 2019, and connections between rural communities and Labour are

being made again. Labour must win rural votes to enter government: there is no realistic path to government without them. And Labour can win rural votes, as our new polling shows.

Labour's path to power runs through the countryside

Labour needs to win a diverse range of seats to form the next government, and resources are scarce. So why focus on rural voters, who can often seem way beyond reach?

Many of Labour's target seats have a significant rural population. Fifty of the 150 seats previously identified by the Fabian Society as ones that Labour should consider targeting have at least 25 per cent of their population living in rural communities. Of these 'significantly rural' target seats:

- 21 are 'village or smaller' with a plurality of residents living in rural communities,

and 29 are not (but still have 25 per cent rural residents)

- They are found in every region and nation in Britain except London and East of England – with over half found in Wales, Scotland, and Yorkshire and Humber (see Figure 1)
- 36 are currently held by the Conservatives, 11 by the SNP, and three by Plaid Cymru
- 20 were lost by Labour in 2019 (like Don Valley); two were held at the 2015 election but lost in 2017 (like Copeland); six seats were lost in the 2015 SNP landslide (like Ardie and Shotts); nine seats elected a Labour MP in 2005 but have not done so since (like Dover); and 13 seats have not elected a Labour MP since 2001 or before (like Preseli Pembrokeshire)

Figure 1: The 50 seats Labour needs to win where rural voters could make the difference are found in every region of Britain except London and eastern England



Source: Author analysis of House of Commons data. Map data: © Crown copyright and database right 2018.

Labour has made strides forward in rural Britain

Clearly, Labour needs the rural vote. So the next question is: can they win it? Many of the 'significantly rural' target seats constituencies have had a Labour MP in the past. And our polling suggests they are well on

the way to voting Labour again – as are some former Conservative strongholds.

Labour has drawn level with the Conservatives in rural areas. A new Fabian Society-YouGov survey found 30 per cent of rural voters would vote Labour, the same proportion who said they would vote

Conservative (excluding those saying don't know and wouldn't vote). This is a 10-point increase in rural support for Labour compared to the 2019 election, when Labour was 33 points behind.

This rural surge is fairly broad. Compared to 2019, Labour has increased its vote share by:

- 13 percentage points amongst under-55s and 8 percentage points amongst over-55s
- 16 percentage points amongst ABC1s
- 10 percentage points amongst homeowners

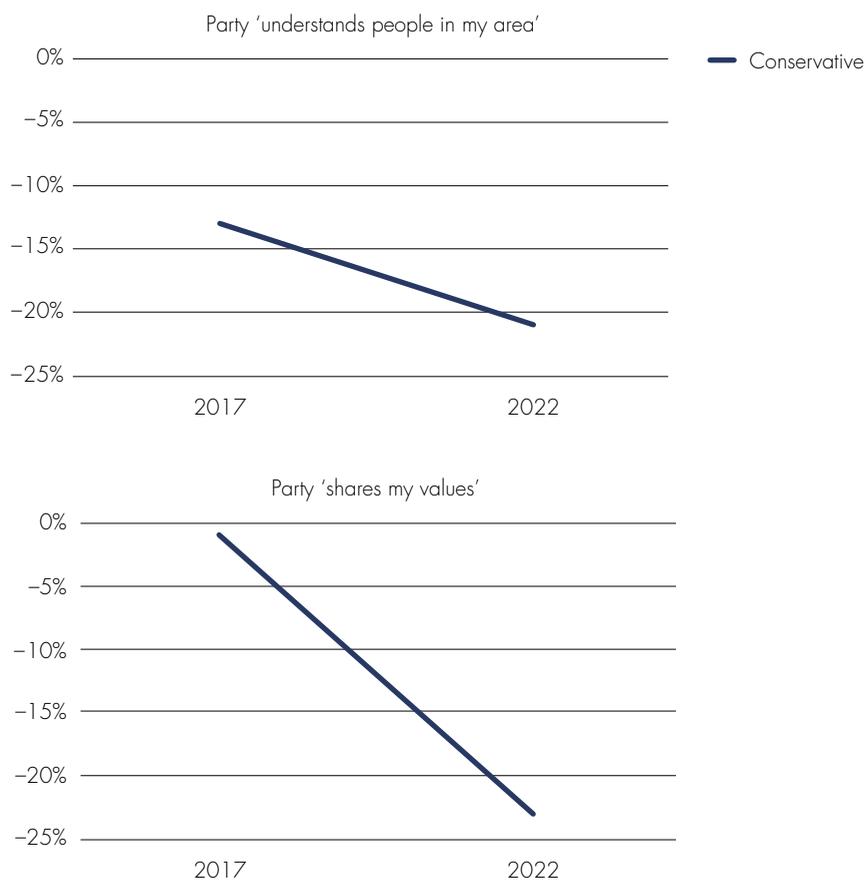
More significantly, Labour has surged ahead in their 50 'significantly rural' target seats to lead the Conservatives by 18 points. Labour is on 42 per cent compared to the Conservatives' 24 per cent in these seats. In 2019, Labour was trailing the Conservatives by 8 points in these same constituencies (34 per cent to 42 per cent).

Labour's brand proved popular in these target seats. More respondents said that Labour understood people in their local area than did not (40 per cent to 36 per cent), and that Labour shared their values (42 per cent to 37 per cent) than did not.

No demographic group in rural Britain is more likely than not to say the Conservatives 'understand people in their area'

The Conservatives appear to have lost touch with their rural heartlands and core voters. Just 28 per cent of respondents in rural places believe the Conservatives understand people who live in their area – compared to 49 per cent who do not and 22 per cent who said they didn't know. And a majority (53 per cent) in rural areas believe that the Conservatives do not share their values – compared to just 30 per cent believing they do and 17 per cent answering 'don't know'. No demographic group in

Figure 2: Conservatives have seen significant falls in the net proportion of rural respondents believing the party does ‘understand people in my area’ (top) and does ‘share my values’ (bottom)



rural Britain is more likely than not to say the Conservatives ‘understand people in their area’ or ‘share their values’ – not even over-55s or homeowners, groups which make up the bedrock of the party’s traditional support. This is a substantial change compared to when the Fabians last asked these questions in 2017 (see Figure 2).

Labour must work hard to win rural voters

Rural Britain is disenchanted with the Conservatives – no longer can they claim to be ‘the party of the countryside’. But currently, neither can Labour. Labour still has an uphill struggle to win these votes and seats. In recent elections, older voters, homeowners and those without a degree have swung away from Labour, and the 50 target rural seats have more people with these characteristics:

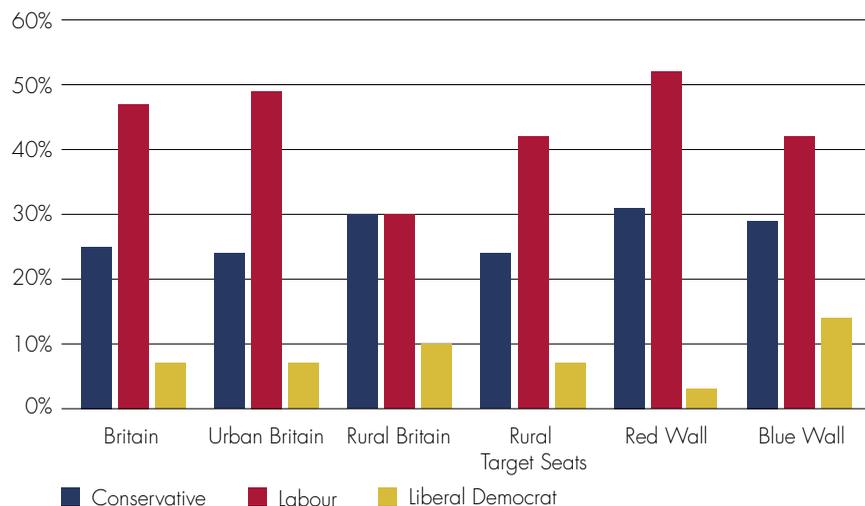
- A larger proportion of over-55s, with 36 per cent over 55 compared to 25 per cent in Labour-held seats in 2019
- A larger proportion of homeowners, with 69 per cent owning their home compared to 54 per cent in Labour-held seats in 2019
- A lower proportion of 16- to 64-year-olds educated to degree level and above, with 40 per cent educated to that level compared to 45 per cent in Labour-held seats in 2019

This partly explains why Labour’s rural vote share still trails its national vote share. Labour may be tied with the Conservatives in rural areas, but the same survey put them 22 percentage points ahead across Great Britain overall (see Figure 3). And Labour’s lead in their ‘significantly rural’ target seats – 18 per cent – is smaller than in other groups of target seats: the party has a 23 point lead in the 125 English and Welsh target seats, and a 21 point lead in the ‘Red Wall’.

But Labour’s relative underperformance in rural areas is not just due to demographics. The party’s support is relatively lower in rural Britain amongst demographic groups that form a core part of Labour’s vote nationally, suggesting a ‘rural effect’ on voting preference:

- 43 per cent of rural under-55s would vote Labour, compared to 59 per cent in urban areas, a 16-point gap

Figure 3: Labour’s vote share in rural Britain is much lower than other parts of the country



- 38 per cent of rural degree holders would vote Labour, compared to 60 per cent in urban areas, a 22-point gap
- 35 per cent of rural managers and professionals (so-called ABC1s) would vote Labour, compared to 54 per cent in urban areas, a 19-point gap

In Labour's 50 'significantly rural' target seats, all demographic groups are less likely to vote Labour than their counterparts in all urban areas – except for over-55s (see Figure 4).

In rural areas, many still question whether Labour understands or cares about their communities

There seems to be a persistent aversion to voting Labour in rural areas. In some ways, this is similar to voters' aversion to Conservatives in the 'Red Wall' until 2019. And, like in 2019, there is an opportunity: the Conservatives are presiding over an energy crisis, and fiscal mismanagement that could prove to be a catalysing experience for rural voters. The risk is that this support evaporates as the election approaches, so Labour needs to take this opportunity to connect with rural voters sooner rather than later.

Keir Starmer still has to convince rural voters that he would make the better PM. When asked who would make a better prime minister, 31 per cent of people in rural areas said Rishi Sunak and 27 per cent said Starmer. In Labour's 50 'significantly rural' target seats, Starmer has only a negligible one-point lead over Sunak, compared to a four point lead in Great Britain overall for Keir Starmer (31 per cent to 27 per cent). Around 40 per cent of people 'don't know' who would make a better PM, in both rural Britain overall and in Labour's 50 'significantly rural' target seats.

Figure 4: Voters are less likely to vote Labour in rural areas than in urban areas

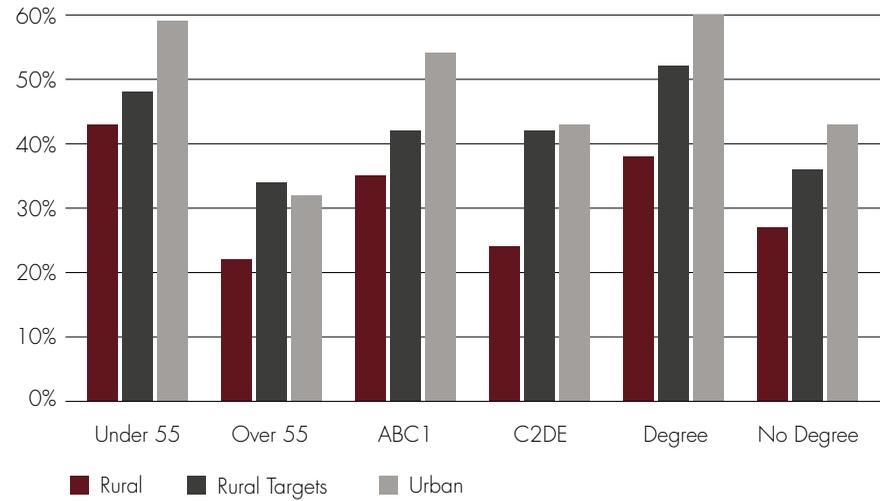


Figure 5: People in rural communities, towns, and urban areas value the same things – and Labour should appeal to them

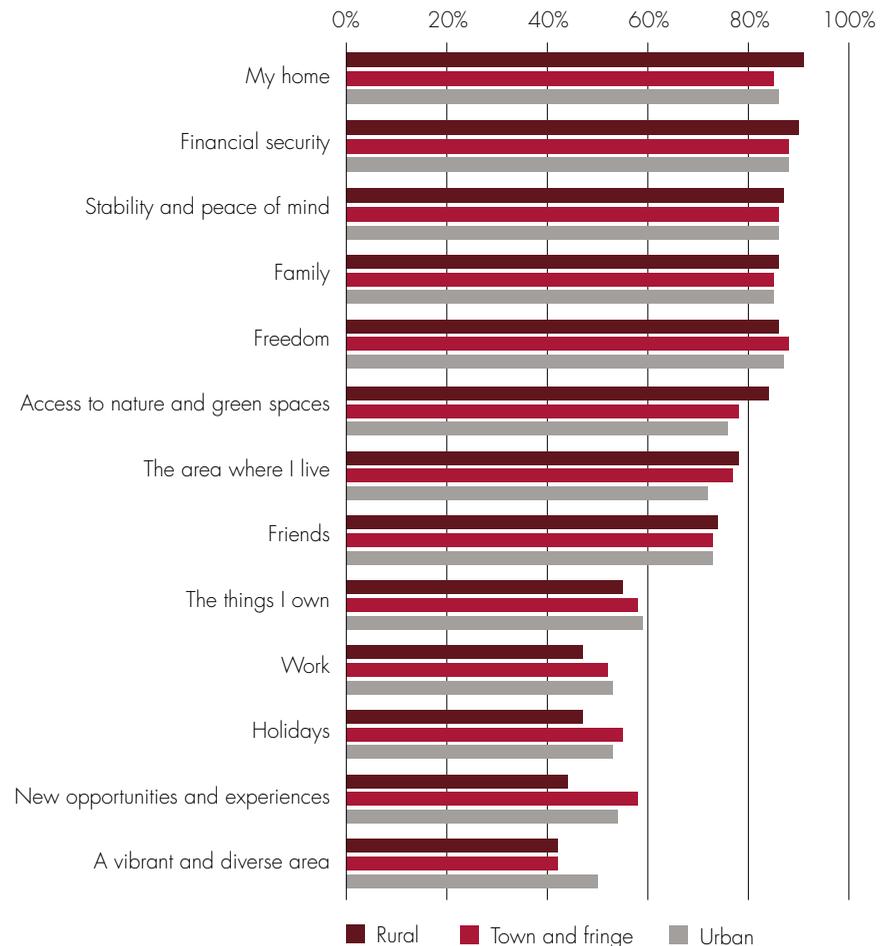
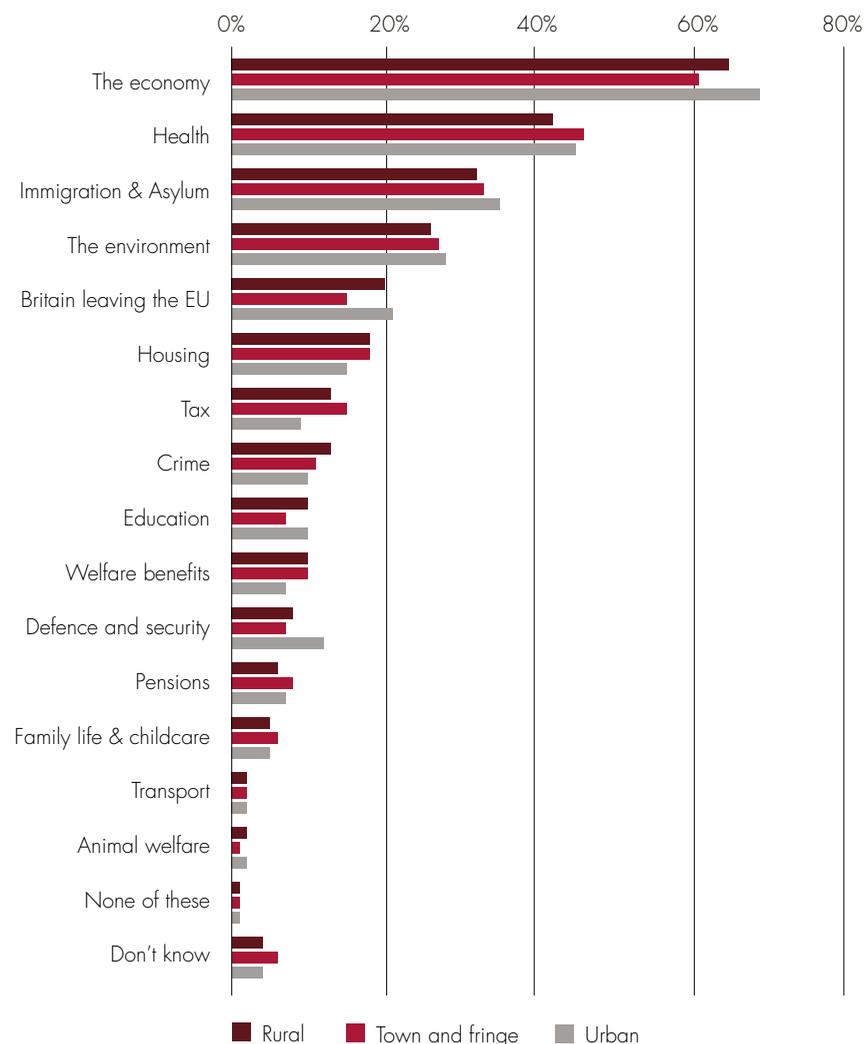


Figure 6: The economy, health, and immigration and asylum were the three most important issues for rural, town and urban areas



Appeal to shared values

People value similar things wherever they live. Our survey asked respondents what they value, as Figure 5 shows. The top three most important for rural areas were: ‘my home’ (91 per cent saying it is important), ‘financial security’ (90 per cent), and ‘stability and peace of mind’ (87 per cent). These were also toward the top priorities for ‘town and fringe’, and urban voters. Starmer’s Labour should have no difficulty in showing they share these values.

Labour should root its national campaign in things that people in all parts of the country value: home, security, stability, and family. Labour should use language that connects with the large and important common ground they share with rural voters, instead of raising issues that excite certain groups, are ultimately divisive, and are less of a priority for voters overall. Appealing to shared values will help build trust in Labour to govern and represent the interests of rural areas – as well as those of towns and cities across the country.

Labour should root its national campaign in things that people in all parts of the country value: home, security, stability, and family

In rural areas, many still question whether Labour understands or cares about their communities. Suspicions linger that Labour is a party of and for urban areas only. In our YouGov survey, 44 per cent of rural respondents said the party did not understand people who live in their local area – compared to 31 per cent who said the party did and 25 per cent responding ‘don’t know’. This contrasts with respondents across the country as a whole, where a slim majority thought the party did understand people who live in their local area (41 per cent to 37 per cent). Similarly, 48 per cent of rural respondents said the party did not

share their values, compared to 35 per cent who said the party did and 17 per cent responding ‘don’t know’. Again, this was different for respondents across the country as a whole, where more people agreed that Labour shared their values than did not (43 per cent to 39 per cent).

How Labour can become the ‘party of the countryside’

Between now and the next election, Labour should do three things to become the ‘party of the countryside’: appeal to shared values, develop a truly ‘one nation’ agenda, and address rural disaffection.

Develop a truly ‘one nation’ policy agenda

Rural communities are not isolated from the problems other places face. Addressing the priorities of rural voters means addressing the priorities of the whole country, including in our towns and largest cities. Our survey shows that rural communities, towns and urban areas share similar concerns: when asked to select the top three most important issues facing the country, ‘the economy’, ‘health’ and ‘immigration and asylum’ came top in all three places (see Figure 6).

For rural areas overall, the top three policy priorities for the next Labour government are: ‘improve NHS services’ (57 per cent), ‘invest in renewable energy such as wind and solar’ (27 per cent), and ‘improve social care’ (24 per cent). These three priorities are shared by voters in Labour’s 50 ‘significantly rural’ target seats and are three of the top four priorities across Great Britain (see Figure 7).

The environment is also a shared concern across all parts of the country. Labour must take care in how it communicates environmental policy – and avoid overblown rhetoric that doesn’t connect with the majority of people. But there is common ground across all areas on some major environmental issues: more than two-thirds (69 per cent) of rural respondents in our survey supported ‘stronger regulation to protect and restore nature, wildlife and the environment in Great Britain’. This is similar to Great Britain overall (66 per cent).

Labour should offer a ‘one nation’ policy agenda to compete with a Conservative ‘divide and rule’ government. Rural areas should see themselves in Labour’s vision alongside other areas. They want to help tackle the biggest challenges we all face: kick-starting the economy, delivering security for all, fixing our public services, and addressing climate change.

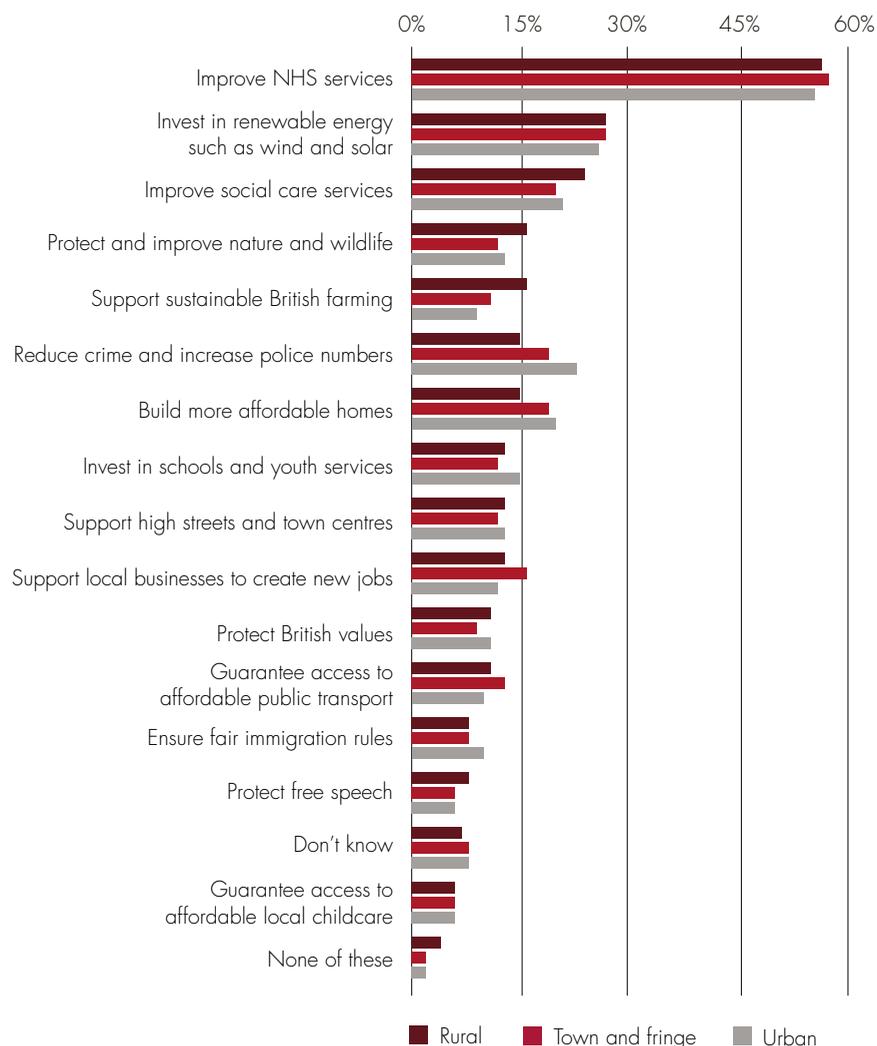
Address rural disaffection

Voters across the country tend to share values and policy priorities, but there are some policy areas which set rural voters apart. These can be addressed without cutting across Labour’s values and other policy priorities.

Rural voters feel their communities are being left behind. They believe decisions are not being made with their communities in mind. When asked ‘is your local area prioritised by politicians in Westminster when decisions are made about the future of the country’, 70 per cent of respondents in rural communities and 73 per cent of respondents in ‘significantly rural’ target seats said it wasn’t. This is higher than across the country as a whole, where 62 per cent felt their area was not prioritised.

Our survey asked respondents if their area was better or worse off than most other areas on 13 different issues (see Figure 8). Only on three issues did more respondents from rural areas say they were better off: access to good schools,

Figure 7: Improve NHS services, invest in renewable energy, and improve social care are important policy priorities for the next Labour government

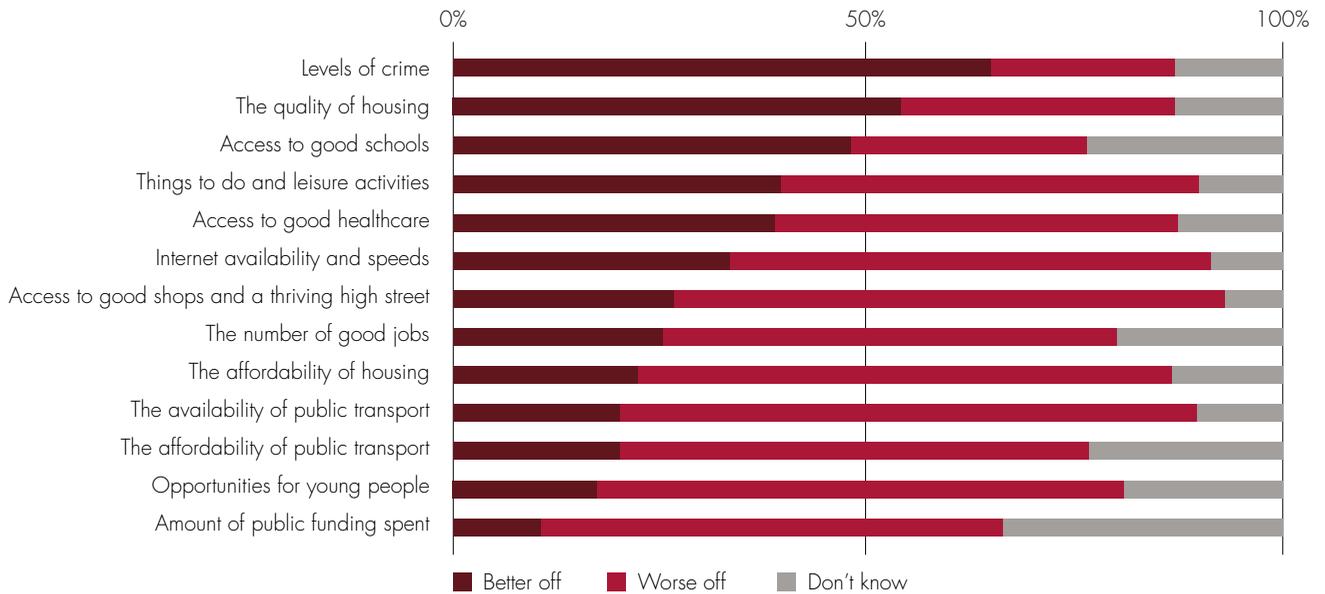


the quality of housing, and levels of crime. On the other 10 issues, more rural people believed their community was worse off compared to others. A majority of rural respondents suggested their area was worse on ‘opportunities for young people’ (51 per cent), the ‘affordability of housing’ (52 per cent), ‘access to good shops and a thriving high street’ (55 per cent), and the ‘availability of public transport’ (59 per cent).

There are a number of specific policy issues where rural respondents are much more likely to feel their area is being let down. As Figure 8 shows, the proportion of rural respondents saying their area was

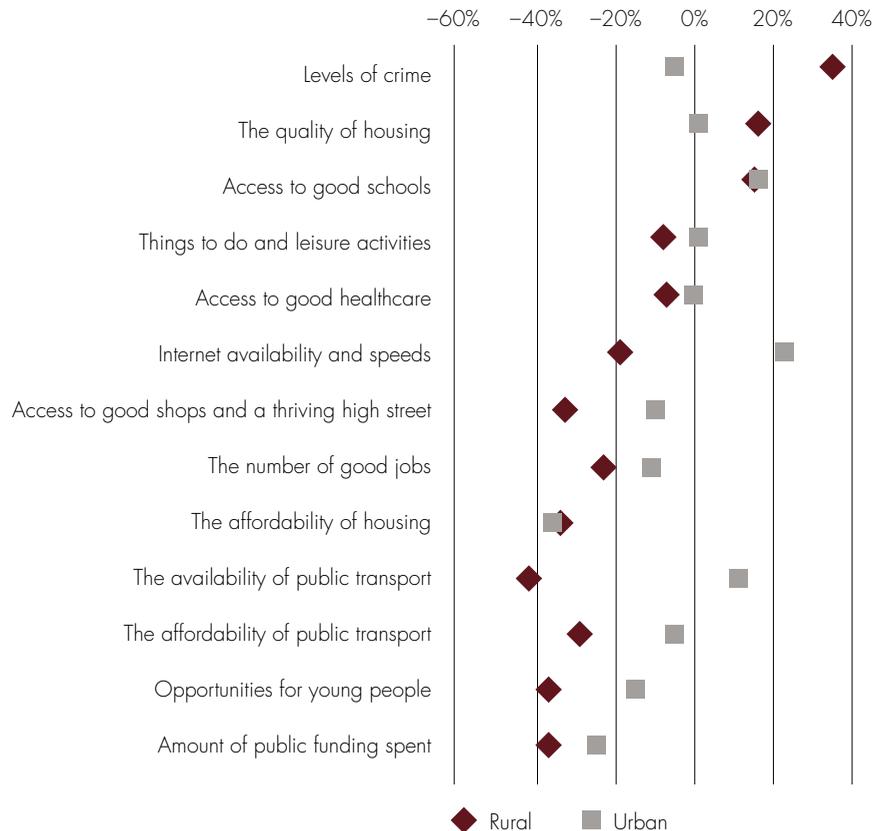
Labour should offer a ‘one nation’ policy agenda to compete with a Conservative ‘divide and rule’ government

Figure 8: On 10 out of 13 issues, more rural people believed that their rural community was worse off than other areas



worse off than others on 'the availability of public transport' was 42 percentage points higher than the proportion saying better off. In urban areas, the proportion of respondents saying 'worse off' was 11 percentage points lower than those saying 'better off' on this issue.

Figure 9: On 7 issues, the difference between 'worse off' and 'better off' was over 10 percentage points higher in rural areas compared to urban ones



After 12 years of Conservative rule, rural communities feel ignored and sidelined – often with good reason

Furthermore, there are distinct policy priorities for rural areas. 'Support for sustainable farming' was a higher priority than average, with 16 per cent backing it as a priority for the next Labour government – compared to 9 per cent in the survey overall.

After 12 years of Conservative rule, rural communities feel ignored and sidelined – often with good reason. Labour should address these specific issues, and win voters over.



Conclusion

At the next election, rural voters will help decide our government. Labour must win rural votes. And Labour can win rural votes. The Conservative brand is badly damaged in their heartlands, leaving an open door for Labour.

Labour should be confident about the progress it has made, but it must be resolute to finish the job – and there is still an uphill struggle. Many rural voters still aren't convinced by Labour, and, as ever, Labour's current lead is unlikely to be matched by votes on election day.

Labour must now appeal to shared values, develop a truly 'one nation' policy agenda, and address rural disaffection.

Get this right and, come election night, Labour activists across the country could be looking at a much redder map than they're used to. **F**

The Fabian Society commissioned YouGov Plc to survey 3,333 adults across Great Britain. The survey was carried out online. Fieldwork was undertaken between 21st and 23rd November 2022. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

Data on voting intention have been rebased to exclude those saying don't know and wouldn't vote.

For the definition of rural, we have adopted YouGov's classification. This draws from the Office for National Statistics work on classifying output areas as urban or rural. Areas that are part of settlements with a population of less than 10,000 were identified, and then designated as one of 'town and fringe', 'villages', or 'hamlets and isolated dwellings'. Areas designated as the latter two are included in the rural definition for this polling. Town and fringe have been presented separately.

For the 'significantly rural' target seats, the Fabian Society has previously identified 150 constituencies that Labour should consider targeting at the next election, where the swing required is less than 13 percentage points. To identify the proportion of residents living in rural areas, we used House of Commons constituency data.

This is based on the current boundaries, not the likely boundaries at the next election. If an election takes place after boundary changes, the exact seats the party will have to target will be different, but the sorts of places they are drawn from will be broadly the same.

Sowing the seeds

Rural areas need support for farming, nature and services – and a Labour government will offer them just that, writes *Daniel Zeichner MP*



Daniel Zeichner is the Labour MP for Cambridge and a shadow minister for environment, food and rural affairs

When, early in his leadership, Keir Starmer launched Labour's Rural Review, he was clear that to be successful, Labour needed to be the party of the whole country, rural as well as urban. Now rural voters are looking at us again.

Labour has recently tasted success in rural and coastal areas, winning mayoral elections in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough with Dr Nik Johnson and in the West of England with Dan Norris; winning Worthing council on the south coast for the first time in the borough's 18-year history; winning 65 per cent of all seats in the inaugural Cumberland council election in the rural north; and taking control of councils including Witney town council, Blaenau Gwent county borough council, and Rosendale borough council. Voters in rural and coastal communities across the country have recognised that Labour's positive offer is providing the answers to the challenges they face.

There is, of course, more to do. Our priority must be to continue to earn the trust of rural voters and ensure that Labour once again becomes the party of the countryside.

The foundations of our rural and coastal communities have been weakened by 12 years of Tory government. All over Britain, such communities are suffering the effects of cuts to public transport funding, a lack

of affordable housing for younger generations, GPs and dentists being stretched to breaking point, and the closure of community hubs such as village shops, post offices and pubs. People living in rural and coastal communities feel badly let down, as they told us loud and clear in Labour's Rural England policy review which took evidence through last spring and summer.

The exodus of the young has left people growing old hundreds of miles away from their children and grandchildren

The result of Conservative failings is that young people have to 'get out to get on', moving far away from their homes and loved ones to find decent opportunities. In doing so, they take their spending power away from the towns and villages, compounding the problems faced by local high streets, pubs, banks and post offices. When they lose both young people and these sorts of local institutions, the effect on

communities can be devastating, damaging the very social fabric that binds people together. The exodus of the young has left people growing old hundreds of miles away from their children and grandchildren, and they are feeling the aftershocks in every part of their life: declining prosperity, an eroded sense of community and a growing sense of insecurity.

This government's own 'Rural Proofing' reports merely serve to highlight their complacency, their inadequate understanding, and their siloed response to the issues faced by rural communities. They document extensive failures. Half the rural population live in areas that have the poorest access to services based on minimum travel times, compared with just 2 per cent of the urban population. The average weekly household expenditure on transport costs in rural areas is £114, compared with £76 in urban areas.

Houses are less affordable in rural areas than in urban, and around half of all houses in the most rural areas are 'energy inefficient', compared to just 7 per cent in urban areas. Broadband speeds and 4G coverage are also significantly poorer. Unsurprisingly given these disadvantages, the report found that productivity is lower in rural areas, and actually fell between 2001 and 2018 from 10 per cent below the England average to 18 per cent lower.



confusion around Environmental Land Management schemes and the threatened removal of environmental protections in the name of growth and scrapping retained EU law.

Labour's offer is fundamentally different. We want to see more of our own food grown here in Britain, consumers buying British, and investment to create countryside jobs, cut carbon and restore nature. We want Britain's high food and farming standards put into law, which would support British farmers, small and large, to grow sustainably here. This would be accompanied by a new binding duty in trade negotiations to help deliver economic opportunities across the whole of the UK.

Labour's winning policy platform for the next election will deliver the positive future our rural communities need so badly.

Meanwhile, I'm proud that my shadow cabinet colleagues are already showing how the next Labour government will be on the side of people living in our coastal and countryside communities. We will introduce licensing for holiday lets in coastal and rural communities, enabling them to protect local character while reaping the rewards of thriving tourism. A stronger licensing system will allow genuine holiday lets to be identified while ending the injustice of young people being priced out of their own neighbourhoods, only for those homes to stand empty for months on end.

To address the rural transport crisis, we will ensure councils can improve bus services by regulating and taking public ownership of bus networks. We would also extend the ability to re-regulate local bus services to all areas that want it, a power currently only granted to combined authorities with elected mayors.

Our new community right to buy will let communities take control of pubs, historic buildings and football clubs that come up for sale or fall into disrepair. We will ensure that communities can make the most of the new right by improving the community ownership fund, making seed funds available to invest in their town or village.

We know how much the Tories have neglected our precious countryside. For too long, they have taken rural voters for granted. Rural and coastal communities – like the rest of Britain – need the next Labour government to invest and build thriving towns, villages and coastal communities, each realising their full potential. **F**

After improved transport infrastructure, we know that the most important issue for rural communities is to see a more active and visible rural police presence. Drug crime, county lines, farm machinery theft, wildlife crime and fly tipping are all particular concerns. Crime cost rural residents and businesses an estimated £40.5m in 2021 and local authorities reported clearing up over one million flytipping incidents in the most recent year. But as with the rest of our damaged and failing public sector, enforcement action is down: nearly a quarter fewer fixed penalty notices were issued, and court fines were down over half.

Our farmers and food producers are the economic backbone of the countryside, but they have seen the Conservatives look to water down standards on key areas like environmental protections and animal welfare rather than being supported to take advantage of our high quality and fantastic produce.

Meanwhile, the Tories' changes to farm support payments risk putting many small family and mixed farms out of business, favouring further intensification, automation and aggregation into bigger estates. Environmentalists warn of a wider 'attack on nature' from the recent chaos and

Hidden problems

The cost of living crisis will make rural poverty even worse.
We cannot keep ignoring it, write *Mark Shucksmith* and *Jane Atterton*



Professor Mark Shucksmith OBE is Professor of Planning at Newcastle University. He was awarded an OBE in 2009 for services to rural development and to crofting

Dr Jane Atterton is manager and senior lecturer in the Rural Policy Centre at SRUC (Scotland's Rural College)

IN BRITAIN, UNLIKE in many other countries, poverty is widely thought to be a predominantly urban phenomenon. Superficially, there is evidence to support this view: the latest government figures for England in 2018/19 show 17 per cent of residents of urban districts in poverty, compared to 14 per cent of those in rural districts. This has led to rural poverty and financial vulnerability often being neglected by research, policy and practice.

However, analysis of the British Household Panel Survey shows that 50 per cent of rural households experienced poverty at some point between 1991 and 2008 (compared to 54 per cent of those in urban Britain). Surveys by the Financial Conduct Authority revealed that 54 per cent of rural dwellers were financially vulnerable in 2018. Poverty in rural areas is therefore a serious issue and more widespread than often assumed. Moreover, it is now widely accepted that the indicators used to measure poverty and therefore target resources are less appropriate to a rural context.

Place-based measures of poverty such as the Index of Multiple Deprivation underestimate the scale and extent of rural disadvantage, mainly because people in poverty in rural areas tend to be dispersed amongst more affluent households. And poverty measures do not take account of cost of living differences other than

housing costs, which can be significant – particularly in remote rural areas (see for example Loughborough University's minimum income standard work). A Joseph Rowntree Foundation report for the Scottish government in 2021 found additional minimum living costs for households in remote rural areas typically add 15 to 30 per cent to a household budget compared with urban areas of Britain. This disparity is expected to grow following the substantial increase in energy and other living costs this year.

While many factors underlie poverty and financial hardship in both rural and urban areas, research suggests several additional factors contribute to poverty in a rural context. The first is the importance of employment in sectors such as agriculture, tourism and social care, where incomes and opportunities for progression are low and pension schemes usually non-existent. Analysis of the BHPS in 2000 showed that that low pay is more prevalent and more persistent in rural than in urban areas. Our recent Rural Lives study confirms this preponderance of low-paid, low-skill, precarious jobs, which are often unstable and seasonal. Rural poverty is also related to self-employment, under-employment and seasonal and part-time working, with fewer opportunities for training or career progression. Poor public transport, an inability

to afford to run a private car and a lack of childcare and eldercare services mean that many people are unable to travel to access better paid jobs in urban areas, leaving them reliant on local labour markets. The study also reveals the inability of the welfare system to adequately support those in rural areas who rely on multiple seasonal jobs or who do not have adequate digital connectivity and/or skills to access online services. Added to this is the stigma of claiming benefits in small communities.

There are structural factors at play in rural areas, too. In many rural areas of the UK, local residents compete in the housing market with affluent incomers looking for a residential property or a second or holiday home. Research has shown that there is a limited supply of affordable homes to buy or rent, with much lower investment in social housing. Poor households in rural areas are therefore more likely to live in private rented houses than those in urban areas, where social housing is more available.

Poverty is exacerbated by declining service provision, leaving people either without basic services (perhaps because they cannot access digital alternatives due to slow/unreliable connectivity or a lack of skills) or forced to travel long distances to access them. Studies have consistently found evidence of higher rural living costs due to higher fuel costs for heating and transport, higher prices

for food and other essentials, and an inability to shop around for the best deals.

The impacts of the current cost-of-living crisis in rural areas

Based on the Rural Lives research, we argue that the cost of living crisis and rising inflation is affecting rural households particularly severely. Caitlin Robinson and Giulio Mattioli mapped 'double energy vulnerability' across Great Britain and found that it is a particular challenge for rural households, who are likely to suffer the greatest financial pressure in the months ahead. This is because they have to spend a higher proportion of their household income on fuel for transport and on heating their homes, which tend to be older, larger, poorly insulated, difficult and costly to retrofit with insulation, and are often not connected to mains energy supplies (and so not protected from spiralling energy costs by the energy price cap).

In England, even before the latest price rises about a third of households were predicted to experience fuel poverty in rural West Norfolk, Northeast Lincolnshire, Herefordshire, Shropshire and Richmondshire. Modelling work by Energy Action Scotland in early 2022 found

The social policy reforms introduced between 1997 and 2010 proved highly effective in reducing poverty

that 57 per cent of households in the Western Isles and 47 per cent in the Highlands of Scotland were experiencing fuel poverty. More recent work by the same organisation has suggested that the proportion of households in fuel poverty in the Western Isles is now at 80 per cent, with energy bills rising by 240 per cent over the last year.

Evidence from the Rural Lives project, collected before the current cost of living crisis, found that the human impacts of the high cost of fuel were substantial. We heard of older people unable to afford to put on their heating, people relying on collecting

firewood and only heating one room, and families unable to afford to buy more oil (minimum delivery 500 litres) after they ran out in midwinter.

In England, ACRE has called for the government to do more for both rural residents and businesses. In Scotland, recent work by GrowBiz has highlighted a 'cost of business' crisis among those operating in a rural environment, with implications for business owners' health and wellbeing. Many rural and island communities are also facing indirect challenges relating to the cost of living crisis. For example, there has been increased pressure on health and social care services as carers can no longer afford the fuel they need to reach patients.

How can financial hardship and vulnerability in rural communities be tackled?

Research suggests that rural poverty is best addressed through a combination of people-centred and place-based measures. The social policy reforms introduced between 1997 and 2010, such as tax credits and pension credits, proved highly effective in reducing poverty in rural and urban areas alike. Their impact in rural areas was diminished by lower claimant rates, however, and we argue in Rural Lives that such measures could be even more effective if complemented by local place-based action to promote awareness and take-up.

Addressing the cost-of-living crisis and rising fuel poverty facing so many rural households requires action on many levels. Most immediately, it requires benefits and pensions to rise in line with inflation alongside initiatives to promote take-up of benefits in rural areas by those who are eligible. Local initiatives like WarmHubs in Northumberland can be effective in providing not only a warm space for people but accompanying this with advice on benefit entitlements and support for home insulation and energy efficiency.

Given the age and larger size of many rural houses, and the predominance of off-grid properties, energy-related initiatives such as home insulation, help with the costs of oil-buying, and energy efficiency measures and advice should be expanded. In many cases there are successful local schemes (often run by the third sector) that can be built on. These could be assisted by grants for the installation of more energy-efficient heating systems for those in most

need and by rural-proofing and island-proofing new regulations which threaten the viability of rural insulation schemes.

The next government must also acknowledge the particular challenges facing rural businesses, the vast majority of which are micro enterprises and frequently go under the radar of public sector support services, but which provide vital services and job opportunities for their communities. Added to this, more secure funding for community and third sector organisations, including support for their network of volunteers, is vital.

In the medium-term, encouragement for renewable energy generation in rural areas could be given by restoring the incentives that have been withdrawn in recent years, investing in the infrastructure necessary to feed increased power into the grid, and enabling residents of these areas to better benefit from the cheaper energy produced there. There are many instructive local community-run schemes such as the Knoydart energy project in north west Scotland.

We can summarise the key policy messages from the Rural Lives project as follows:

- Many rural residents are at risk of poverty, but poverty is imagined as only urban. Policies need to address rural needs and circumstances.
- The welfare system, in particular, is not well adapted to rural lives.
- The cost-of-living crisis will hit people in rural areas especially hard due to double energy vulnerability and higher living costs.
- Centralisation and digitalisation of services and support affect rural citizens unevenly, with damaging impacts on the wellbeing of the most vulnerable.
- More support is required for voluntary and community organisations to continue to reach into rural areas and to maintain essential social infrastructure.
- A lack of affordable housing opportunities in rural areas should be addressed through greater investment in social housing in villages and towns. **F**

Dr Jayne Glass (Uppsala University) and Polly Chapman (CEO, HISEZ CIC) also contributed to this article.

Under the surface

Economic problems have been allowed to proliferate in rural areas – we need an ambitious plan to tackle them, writes *Jonathan Roberts*



Jonathan Roberts is director of external affairs for the Country Land and Business Association

THE BRITISH COUNTRYSIDE is a beautiful place; and, at first glance, life in rural areas seems tranquil. Look closer, however, and you will see the signs that our rural economy, and the communities that underpin it, are struggling.

In many villages, the shops and post offices have already gone, and those rural pubs that have remained open are often one bad month from closing. As housing becomes ever more unaffordable, local families are driven out – a phenomenon that damages the viability of local primary schools, churches and other social hubs.

Even those businesses with extraordinary potential struggle to find workers in areas where fewer and fewer people can afford to live.

An opinion poll published by the Country Land and Business Association in 2022 found that just 15 per cent of people living in rural areas believe the government is doing enough to promote economic growth in the countryside. Almost 80 per cent said that a lack of affordable housing was driving people out of rural areas, with poor connectivity, restrictive planning rules and lack of skilled job creation all among the societal issues being blamed.

Economic data shows that those polled are right to be sceptical. DEFRA figures show that the rural economy is 19 per cent

less productive than the national average – meaning £43bn is missing from our domestic output. Only 46 per cent of rural communities have adequate 4G coverage. Rural homes are less affordable than those in urban areas, whilst rural jobs pay less. In the countryside, jobs, skills training, public services and public transport are all harder to come by. Even heating your home costs more: in 2017, the rural population needed to spend an estimated £190m extra to heat their homes.

Yet the UK government's levelling up agenda has taken no interest at all in the rural economy. This speaks to a broader problem in government. Ask a minister, or indeed any policymaker, about the rural economy and they will straight away talk about farming. Yet farming represents less than 4 per cent of economic activity in the countryside. Eighty-five per cent of rural businesses have nothing to do with farming at all.

This misunderstanding results in a lack of focus or interest in developing the policies necessary to generate the kind of economic growth rural areas so desperately need. Rural businesses face structural barriers to their success. A government with understanding of the countryside, and ambition for it, would be hell bent on removing those barriers.

In part, this confusion is due to a wilful misunderstanding of what we mean by economic development. Too often people invoke the horrors of major developments ruining the landscape, when in reality what we need is sensible, small-scale, organic growth. We need a small number of homes to be built in a large number of villages. We need a planning regime that facilitates disused old farm buildings being converted into office or other business space with ease.

The current planning regime is not so helpful. Enormous time lags, large upfront costs associated with making a planning application, and the significant risk of an unsuccessful outcome mean that many businesses simply give up trying to find a way to work within its restrictions and abandon development projects altogether, sometimes after incurring significant expenses.

The criteria businesses need to fulfil require endless discussions between applicant and authority. The problem has become so widespread that government has been forced to create a disputes mechanism simply to resolve disagreements. This, combined with the costly engagement of professional advisors to help applicants wade through the mire of detail, is actively deterring businesses from carrying on proposals that would create jobs in the countryside.

Such a planning regime is bound to hinder rural economic development. Case studies make clear why: one planning application for the redevelopment of a site in a market town required £1m in upfront costs for supporting evidence and was ultimately refused. A planning application for a plant that converts biomass into energy incurred £300,000 in upfront costs and was also refused – to the detriment of the government’s own ‘green’ agenda. One Country Land and Business Association member spent 20 years navigating the planning system to convert listed farm buildings into the kind of commercial office spaces that would encourage entrepreneurs to find a home for their business in the countryside.

These barriers combine with so many others to artificially hold the rural economy back.

Thankfully, a report by an influential parliamentary body has done the government’s job for it. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Business and the Rural Powerhouse has published a report following one of the most comprehensive inquiries ever into the rural economy, incorporating evidence from more than 50 trade bodies, business leaders, academics and campaign groups.

The 27 recommendations cover planning reform, housing, tax, skills, connectivity and farming, as well as the processes by which the government makes its decisions. These policy fields alone give an understanding as to why so little attention is paid to the rural economy. Speak to anyone in government about the countryside and they will say ‘that’s DEFRA’s job’ – yet for the most part, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs does not have the policy levers at its disposal to grow the rural economy. Those powers exist in the Treasury, Department for Levelling Up, Department for Business and the Department for Digital, Communications, Media and Sport. This is why you will never achieve a cohesive rural economic policy without better cross-departmental working.

DEFRA has made a noble effort to improve the situation through its annual ‘rural proofing’ reports, but this policy has delivered no tangible results. That is why it is so important for political parties to develop a comprehensive policy platform specifically focused on growing the rural economy. In doing so, they should use the APPG report as inspiration – not

A commitment to tackling regional inequalities means nothing if it does not apply to the countryside

least because it is the first genuine vision for economic growth in the countryside in recent history.

A commitment to tackling regional inequalities means nothing if it does not apply to the countryside. By delivering an ambitious and robust plan for the countryside, £43bn could be added to the economy of England alone. At a time of almost permanent economic difficulty, that is an opportunity that we can no longer afford to miss. Rural businesses and communities are ready and raring to go, and it is about time government shared their ambition. **F**

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Making the links

Rural communities are losing out because of shrinking public transport networks. Investing in better buses would help the economy, residents' wellbeing and the environment, writes *Silviya Barrett*



Silviya Barrett is director of policy and research at Campaign for Better Transport

PUBLIC TRANSPORT IS rapidly diminishing in our villages and small towns, leaving many people stranded in transport deserts. That was what we found in 2020, when we were commissioned by the countryside charity CPRE to research the absence of transport choice in England's small towns. Our report revealed that a shocking 56 per cent of small towns in the areas we looked at could be considered a transport desert or are at imminent risk of becoming one.

Around a third of England's population live in small towns and villages. Many lost their railway stations during the Beeching cuts of the 1960s and never had an adequate replacement bus service. Towns frequently have no control over their transport destiny, being left out of devolutionary transport policy, which remains focused on urban centres.

These areas, which do not benefit from many national policy initiatives, had for years been reliant on local authority support for bus services to connect poorer or isolated communities. But even this limited support has been severely cut. We found that in the decade to 2019, local authority funding for buses was cut by 43 per cent, with some county councils removing funding altogether from supported buses. And this does not account for the devastating impact of the pandemic, which has

further regressed the state of public transport in rural areas. Even as services were being propped up by the government's bus recovery grant, an astonishing 16 per cent of English bus services were cut in the first year of the pandemic alone. Simply put, the state of transport is becoming a dire situation for rural communities.

What is the impact on the people living in these areas? And what is the impact on our environment? As one of our supporters in rural Somerset, Judith, told us recently: "Our community could not survive without a bus service. People need buses to access employment and healthcare, to visit shopping centres, to socialise, to volunteer, to reach train stations, to go to a bank, to get to college. The needs are endless – local services are few." Another supporter, Sarah in Kent, told us: "I need buses to take my daughter anywhere: since they were cut I can no longer take her to the toddler group we had been attending every week."

A weak rural public transport network deepens isolation and loneliness. It denies people access to work, education, and healthcare, worsening economic hardship. This fuels car dependency which leads to more air pollution and carbon emissions. A reliable public transport network has the potential to dramatically transform communities such as these, socially, economically, and environmentally.

Public transport is particularly essential to job seekers. Those in 'left-behind' areas are twice as likely both to be out of work and to be without access to a car. Combined with poorer public transport connectivity in rural areas, this presents persistent barriers to accessing job opportunities, particularly for those who are already disadvantaged when it comes to finding work, including people with disabilities and single parents. Public transport difficulties have been shown to exclude people from even applying to jobs, knowing that timetables won't match up, the cost is too high (fares have risen 63 per cent in the last decade) or the service too slow. The pandemic revealed that it is low-income earners who are more likely to be required to work in-person with the ability to get to work on time. Even in the government's National Bus Strategy, there is recognition of "the vital role that buses have in getting people to work at all times of the day and night". So why, then, are rural communities continuing to battle against bus service cuts, and what should be done?

In 2021, the government announced a £3bn 'transformational' pot of funding and asked local transport authorities (LTAs) to develop bus service improvement plans in order to access funding. All 75 LTAs developed ambitious plans but, in the end, only £1.08bn was allocated to 31 authorities – just 40 per cent of applicants. In this competitive



game for funding, rural local authorities were at a disadvantage. Rural authorities have seen their transport teams shrink, leaving them without the expertise of urban competitors and without the capacity to put together compelling plans. Yet these are the authorities that stand to gain the most from transport funding. Instead, the cycle of decline will continue and car dependency will increase.

Investment in our public transport network at a sufficient level to meet our levelling-up and net-zero ambitions is crucial. Funding structures must also change. The current competitive, fragmented funding pots are harmful not only for authorities lacking the experienced professionals needed to secure support, but to their communities too. Funding needs to be restructured into a single pot for buses with long-term allocations given to all local authorities, and a greater proportion should be dedicated to boosting service provision and improving affordability. More funding can be made available for local buses by reallocating funds away from carbon intensive road-building projects; cancelling

just five currently planned road building schemes could save the Treasury £16bn.

Improving transport connectivity must be central to the government's aims of levelling up and achieving net zero

Another way to fairly address this crisis would be the introduction of a pay-as-you-drive system of vehicle taxation. We surveyed 3,000 people and found that 60 per cent believed vehicle taxation needs reforming. The rise of electric vehicles (EVs) has caused an accompanying decline in the revenue raised by fuel duty and vehicle excise duty (VED), neither of which EV

drivers currently pay. In 2025, VED will be extended to EVs, but a reduction in fuel duty revenue will leave a far bigger gap in public finances. Replacing both taxes with a variable per-mile road-user charge could be fairer and mean that those with little choice but to drive in rural transport deserts would pay significantly less than those choosing to drive in urban areas where the journey could easily be made by public transport. A proportion of the revenue raised from pay-as-you-drive could be invested in making public transport better and more affordable everywhere.

Improving transport connectivity must be central to the government's aims of levelling up and achieving economic growth and net zero, and it should be a priority of government to ensure that there is maintained and reliable public transport connectivity in rural areas. While the continued extension of Covid support grants for buses is welcome, these must be replaced with long-term support, not inefficient competition. Everyone should have access to affordable and reliable transport that does not cost the earth. **F**

Taking ownership

Scottish land reform is tackling the root causes of rural decline, writes *Colin Smyth*



Colin Smyth is a Labour MSP for the South Scotland region. He is the shadow cabinet secretary for constitution, Europe, and external affairs

TUCKED AWAY IN the beautiful Esk Valley of my South Scotland Parliamentary region in the ‘Muckle Toon’ of Langholm, a quiet land reform revolution is taking place. Langholm Moor sits on the doorstep of the former textile town and was held for centuries in the vast land portfolio of the hereditary peer the Duke of Buccleuch. When the Buccleuch estates efforts to revive grouse shooting on the moor proved unproductive, the land was declared surplus and promptly put up for sale in 2019.

The Moor’s dramatic hills, native woodland habitat and stunning river valley are home to hen harriers and curlew, and it had marked the historic boundaries of the common land for over 250 years. It’s little wonder, then, that the tight-knit community recognised an opportunity. Against the odds, a bold fundraising effort was launched by the Langholm Initiative that put the town on the map, captured international attention and raised a remarkable £6m, including thousands of online crowdfunding donations and £1m from the Scottish Land Fund. In South Scotland’s biggest community buy-out, 10,000 hectares of the duke’s land – the equivalent of over 5,500 football pitches – came under the protection and ownership of the people who live and work there.

Until Langholm Moor, land reform was largely seen a ‘Highlands and Islands’ problem (and as a representative from the opposite end of the country, not one I could claim to have expertise in). Now it has been firmly established as a Scotland-wide issue. The moor is now known as the Tarras Valley Nature Reserve, and the community owners are pushing the boundaries of ecological and community restoration, improving the environment and seeking to build a better economic future by pursuing sustainable and responsible tourism.

Their inspiring story has captured hearts across the world for many reasons, but one is unquestionably because, in its own small way, it seeks to move the dial on Scotland’s unequal land ownership.

Land ownership in Scotland

Until recently, the Duke of Buccleuch was Scotland’s largest landowner, with over 200,000 acres to his name. He has now been overtaken by ‘new money’ in the form of Danish billionaire Anders Holch Povlsen, who owns 221,000 acres. In line with a pattern of ownership that has changed little since the 1800s, and indeed has become more pronounced in recent decades, half of Scotland’s private land is now in the hands of just over 400 families – 0.008% of the population.

It is often argued that it is land use, not land ownership, that matters. But as the Scottish government’s Land Reform Review Group concluded in their 2014 report *The Land of Scotland and the Common Good*, “Ownership is the key determinant of how land is used, and the concentration of private ownership in rural Scotland can often stifle entrepreneurial ambition, local aspirations and the ability to address identified community need.”

Land is a finite resource whose value tends to increase in the long-term. This means that to make money, landowners can simply hold onto land, and do not need to improve it or use it productively. The current government subsidy available to landowners to meet Scotland’s ambitious tree planting targets has resulted in land prices spiralling upwards, providing an incentive for big landowners to hold onto land.

The highly concentrated ownership also suffocates opportunities for community development and contributes directly to the rise of inequality. House prices and rents have increased significantly, exacerbating the housing crisis in rural Scotland.

Attempts at change

Unsurprisingly, over the years there have been attempts to shift the dial on Scotland’s land ownership. In 1998, Donald Dewar,

then Secretary of State for Scotland, gave his McEwen Lecture, titled Land Reform for the 21st Century. He said: “There is undoubtedly a powerful symbolism – which attracts me greatly – of land reform being amongst the first actions of our new Scottish parliament.”

True to his word, one of his first acts as Scotland’s first minister in the new Scottish parliament was the Abolition of Feudal Tenure etc. (Scotland) Act 2000, ending Scotland’s 800-year-old system of feudal ownership. He followed up with the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, which established the community right to buy and the crofting community right to buy. The latter Act has since been used by communities to buy approximately 57,000 acres of rural land.

The work continued under successive governments, including the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, which introduced the additional community right to buy ‘abandoned, neglected or detrimental’ land and asset transfer provisions to enable community bodies to request control of land and built assets from public authorities. In 2016, the latest Land Reform (Scotland) Act was agreed, strengthening the community right to buy further.

These efforts have been backed by government support for community ownership. Prior to 2000, the then Labour-run Scottish Office provided financial support for a land unit in Highlands and Islands Enterprise to support community buy-outs in the Highlands. In 2000, the Scottish Land Fund was established, with the support of the then Scottish Executive. Initially funded by the National Lottery, its purpose was to provide grants to communities to enable them to buy land. It was relaunched in its current form in 2012 with the Scottish government providing funding of £10m a year, £1m of which made its way to the Langholm Moor buy out.

But reform remains unfinished business.

New threats

Despite these efforts, Scotland is only a little closer to fundamental change in land ownership, and faces a new threat from a surge in land values. The Scottish Land Commission revealed that the average price of estates had increased by a staggering 87 per cent between 2020 and 2021, rising from £4.7 million to £8.8 million, driven partly by the emergence of so-called ‘Green Lairds’.

It’s a misleading term: far from ecologically-minded aristocrats, these Green Lairds are in fact big businesses, buying up land in Scotland as their self-interested response to the climate crisis. They exploit the largely unregulated land market in Scotland to buy huge swathes of land to offset their own carbon emissions, allowing them to claim they have green credentials and in some cases hedge against possible future carbon tax liabilities. It’s a low-risk investment that has the potential to bring high returns. Many of these purchases take place off-market in secret private sales, preventing communities seeking a registration of interest in the land.

These purchases exacerbate land value inflation, meaning that even if communities are interested in community ownership, it is becoming increasingly unaffordable. Community Land fund support is capped at £1m per bid. Few opportunities fall close to that range, so often it only funds the purchase of ‘community assets’ like halls, pubs and lighthouses – worthy, but hardly transformational.

The fight against the climate crisis requires us to re-evaluate the way we manage our land

Land reform in a net zero nation

It can therefore be easy to feel that real reform is a lost cause. But there is clear evidence that people in Scotland remain concerned about the wealth inequalities of concentrated land ownership. Scottish government research on attitudes to land reform in Scotland in 2020 showed that 71 per cent of respondents supported widening ownership of both rural and urban land.

The Scottish government are now consulting on a new land reform bill with a particular focus on large-scale holdings, with proposals to introduce: a public interest test on transfers of such landholdings; a duty to provide prior notification of an intention to sell and a linked pre-emptive right to buy for communities; compulsory compliance with some of the currently

voluntary land rights and responsibilities statement; compulsory land management plans; and conditionality when it comes to public funding for land-based activities. These are all proposals worthy of support.

Land reform in Scotland is needed now more than ever. The fight against the nature and climate crises requires us to re-evaluate the way we manage our land in accordance with the principle that public money should be given in return for public goods, such as increased biodiversity or reduced carbon emissions.

Huge gaps remain in the plans for reform, not least the fact that if ownership matters, so too does how much you can own. The Scottish Land Commission found that Scotland “is currently an outlier by international standards in having no constraints on who can own land and how much they can own”.

A land cap is a necessity in any meaningful reform and would go a long way towards preventing one individual from acquiring large swathes of Scotland’s land and storing the profits in offshore tax havens. Those who acquire large pockets of land should also be required to register in the EU or UK for tax purposes.

The Scottish government’s plans for land reform should also include finalising the complete land register, improving transparency, and effective reform of deer and grouse management. There are other imaginative proposals, such as giving tenant farmers a meaningful right to buy. A land value tax, which would create a disincentive against ownership for ownership’s sake, is an old idea whose time may well be coming.

Almost all community buy-outs so far have depended on a willing seller, seeking to get rid of surplus land quickly, and a creative community, supported partly by public funds. Even with both, too many people and communities with innovative ideas for how to use our land are denied the opportunity.

The future of land management in Scotland must be community focused if we are to meet our environmental targets and create a fairer, more equal society. We need to scale up the resources available from the Scottish Land Fund and free up opportunities to access land. Putting land in the hands of local communities like Langholm will truly empower them, helping local businesses thrive and creating a fairer, more sustainable Scotland. **F**

Levelling down

Public services in rural areas are not fit for purpose, writes *Graham Biggs*



Graham Biggs MBE is chief executive of the Rural Services Network

NO-ONE SHOULD BE disadvantaged by where they live. This is meant to be a fundamental principle of government policy. In the real world, however, these are just fine words.

For rural areas, the government funding support received for public services is much lower per head of population than that received by their urban counterparts. As a result, those public services and the residents, businesses and communities who rely on them are greatly disadvantaged.

It is not just that rural areas receive less funding; it also costs more to provide services to a rural population. This fact is widely acknowledged but not sufficiently reflected in the various funding formulae used to distribute national funds to support local services.

It is a myth that rural areas need less support. When we look at the measures used to decide which areas need 'levelling up,' then if all rural areas were brought together as a single region – one more populous than Greater London – this region would be, on the government's own measures, the region needing support above all others.

All of the above has been true for decades – but the austerity years made things worse. And the government's renewed appetite for spending cuts is likely to compound the damage.

Local government services

Let us first take local government funding. Rural residents pay 21 per cent more in council tax per head than their urban counterparts; yet the total funding power of rural areas is still less than urban areas, because they receive less money from central government. In 2022/23, urban areas will receive 59 per cent more in government grants per head than rural ones.

The result is that rural residents pay more yet get fewer services. Rural wages are some 6 per cent lower than those in the country as a whole – and the cost of living is higher – yet those living in rural areas pay for more of their local services through council tax.

In 2012 the government seemed to acknowledge the problem and changed the local government funding formula. But through a process called 'damping', it blocked an average of 75 per cent of the benefit reaching each rural authority, and then froze the formula, limiting further changes. In contrast, inner London boroughs gained £236m from the damping processes, £166m of which was received by just five local authorities.

When national resources are scarce it is more – rather than less – important that those resources are distributed fairly. And fairness has to mean fully recognising the different costs to different types of areas of achieving similar outcomes.

The problem is compounded because the demand for and costs of statutory services – those services which councils are legally obliged to provide – are increasing hugely, especially in adult and children's care. This leaves less available for 'discretionary' spending: in 2022/23, rural councils were budgeting to spend £67 per head on discretionary services whilst urban councils were budgeting to spend almost double that (£131.30 per head). But so-called discretionary services are essential for healthy communities to thrive. Support for bus services; community support; support to the local charitable and voluntary sector; provision of sport, leisure and cultural activities; economic and community development; all these are classed as discretionary spending, and all have been, and are being, cut back. This will, in the long term, almost certainly manifest itself in greater costs for the NHS and damage wellbeing.

It also puts rural authorities in a vicious cycle: less funding means less staff capacity, making it harder to find the time to prepare bids in government competitions for funds.

Policing services

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to policing. Rural communities face specific challenges that need to be recognised when it comes to funding and delivering policing in rural areas. Some of those

challenges were highlighted by research commissioned by the National Rural Crime Network (NCRN) in 2021. Key findings showed that the main factors that people in rural areas feel contribute to their vulnerability as potential victims of crime was the fact that they lived far from the nearest police station (34 per cent) and being elderly (21 per cent).

A lack of confidence in the police by the public was also apparent. 21 per cent of respondents from rural areas said they did not report a crime because they thought the police would not take it seriously. 19 per cent said they did not report a crime because they 'dealt with it themselves'. A recent BBC report even found some farmers employing private security due to organised theft of farm vehicles and equipment.

Once again, funding is a problem. Rural police forces face similar financial problems to rural councils. Fixed, non-staff costs are higher amongst rural forces, who cannot benefit from economies of scale due to the need to serve more dispersed, low-density populations. This equates to £32.1m across the forces serving the 10 smallest areas by population, the equivalent of more than 600 officers.

Significantly higher round-trip distances are found in forces serving low-density populations; this, too, increases costs. As rural forces have lower officer numbers, the burden per officer is higher by up to 65 per cent. These factors represent implications for not only service delivery but also officer welfare.

The additional costs of policing rural areas are unavoidable and have a significant impact on service delivery; yet, as with local government services, they are not properly reflected in the formula.

All the more worrying, then, that the evidence suggests that over recent years organised criminal gangs have been increasing their operations in the countryside, which is seen by criminals as lower risk and higher reward than other areas. Whether it's house burglaries, farm machinery theft, or hare coursing, criminals know that policing rural communities across the country is not effectively coordinated in terms of intelligence sharing amongst police forces.

For too long, the specific needs of rural communities have been overlooked when it comes to crime prevention and victim support. The NCRN and its partners are calling

for the creation and funding of a National Rural Crime Unit (NRCU) led by police officers with an expert understanding of the challenges facing rural communities. An NRCU would, for the first time, see national coordination of rural crime teams across the country and sharing of intelligence and best practice. With an enhanced ability to track and analyse rural crime, we could start to work with the government on fairer funding for rural policing and the more effective targeting of existing resources. Rural communities deserve a police service that genuinely understands and responds to their needs.

Health and care services

The February 2022 report of the All-Party Parliament Group on Rural Health and Care and the National Centre for Rural Health and Care highlights the health and social care situation in rural areas and focuses on the challenges that must be addressed. Similar challenges were identified by the Chief Medical Officer's 2021 report *Health in Coastal Communities*.

In summary the inquiry found:

- Emergency services – funding formulas do not properly reflect the impact of rurality on service delivery costs.
- Hospital trusts – just six rural hospital trusts carry a quarter of England's health service funding deficit, with rural area funding adjustments being outweighed by other factors.
- Social care – the costs of funding adult social care are an issue nationally, but rural local authorities often spend a disproportionately large part of their budget on these services.
- Innovation in integrated service delivery and better use of technology offer ways to mitigate the burden of adult social care costs, but overall demand and costs are still rising.
- Island and coastal communities funding formulas do not reflect the particular circumstances and costs of service provision in these settings.

Funding to rural areas adjusts for the extra cost of ambulance provision and also includes an allowance for remoteness.

However, these two factors are outweighed by a further two factors, market forces and health inequalities, which together move around £600m of funding from predominantly rural areas to urban and less rural areas.

In essence, rural residents – who are also, on average, significantly older than those living in towns and cities – are disadvantaged throughout their life compared to their urban counterparts. Access to maternity care is more problematic; the wider community services for children and young people are less accessible; primary and secondary care are less readily available for people of working age, including preventative and screening services; and the provision of both health and social services for the growing proportion of older citizens is increasingly inadequate. We are not offering equal care for all in England, despite the NHS commitment to do so.

Until the basic funding for all public services is put on a demonstrably fair footing, rural levelling up will be impossible to achieve

Importantly, it is not just access to healthcare that is compromised in rural areas, but the very determinants of health themselves. Poorer educational provision and facilities for young people, fewer day centres for those of more advanced years, lacklustre digital connectivity, poor housing stock, and economic uncertainty in the agricultural and tourism industries all influence the health and wellbeing of rural residents.

Rural residents, communities and businesses are being disadvantaged by where they live. Until the basic funding for all public services is put on a demonstrably fair footing, rural levelling up will be impossible to achieve. What we need is a cross-departmental, properly funded rural strategy – anything less would represent a dereliction of duty. **F**

Coastal erosion

Coastal and rural areas have shared interests when it comes to levelling up, argue *Sheela Agarwal* and *Sheena Asthana*



Professors Sheela Agarwal and Sheena Asthana are co-directors of the Centre of Coastal Communities at the University of Plymouth

THE GOVERNMENT'S LEVELLING up agenda explicitly included a commitment to coastal and rural communities. But in the popular consciousness as well as in policy, the project has become synonymous with the Conservative party's attempts to retain 'red wall' parliamentary seats in the Midlands and north of England. Recent political turbulence and the prospect of a long, deep-seated recession has thrown the future of levelling up as a whole into doubt. There is a now very real risk that the needs of 'left behind' communities in coastal and rural areas will fade even further from the political spotlight, despite the fact that significant challenges remain, exacerbated by Covid-19 and the cost of living and energy crises.

Left behind: the challenges facing coastal and rural communities

Deprivation in coastal and rural communities is almost always associated with a local dependence on industries affected by long-term decline and/or economic restructuring. In the case of coastal communities, these are tourism, fishing, defence and shipbuilding, whilst rural communities have been overly reliant on agriculture, forestry and mining. With the loss of traditional industries, communities have become disconnected from what they once did, resulting in political and cultural dislocation and a decline in the capacity to transform self and place.

Coastal and rural communities share many challenges, but they are far from uniform and economic 'leaders' and 'laggers' can be found in both contexts. Many 'lagging' areas experience acute social and economic problems, including low productivity and wages; unemployment; seasonal jobs; low skills and education attainment; social immobility; poor quality housing; second homes left empty for large parts of the year; an ageing population; high rates of anti-depressant and opioid prescription; and poor public health and criminal justice outcomes. Indeed, the difficulties facing coastal communities were the focus of the Chief Medical Officer's 2021 annual report. Highlighting the presence of a coastal 'health deficit', the report details how "living on the coastal fringe is associated with an increased risk of ill-health, *over and above* that which can be explained by demography, ethnicity and socio-economic deprivation." In rural communities, meanwhile, farmers are one of the professional groups at highest risk of suicide in England and Wales, and in both, children and young people make less progress and achieve lower GCSE grades than their peers in equivalent inland urban areas, and suffer from higher incidences of self-harm and alcohol and substance abuse disorders.

With coastal and rural areas exhibiting a high (and growing) spatial concentration of

household poverty, deprivation is becoming entrenched in some localities even as other areas flourish. Yet our detailed understanding of the spatial patterning across coastal and rural areas remains limited, as does our understanding of the complex and inter-linked factors that operate in different localities. It is time to refresh our mental maps of the geographies of coastal and rural deprivation and examine what this might mean for policy development.

Understanding the geographies of coastal and rural deprivation

Deprivation is often perceived as a problem of inner cities or viewed through the lens of the north-south divide. It is seldom seen as a core-periphery problem. This may in part reflect the choice of variables used to construct the widely-used index of multiple deprivation, a metric which dominates empirical policy discourse and which, it has been argued, fails to reflect the nature of rural and coastal disadvantage. But of likely greater significance is the administrative geography of the UK and the manner in which this affects the availability of relevant socio-economic data, its analysis, and the subsequent development of policy. Evidence on health, educational, business and employment outcomes in coastal and rural communities is, for instance, almost invariably masked by local authority averages.



and priorities are required. They should reflect the particular needs of specific coastal and rural communities. Through a place-based lens, with Britain's departure from the European Union and the loss of access to European Structural funds, never has there been a greater need for funding and investment for transport, digital, and socio-cultural infrastructures in order to address peripherality and low productivity and attract both knowledge-based industries and skilled workers. Greater legislative control must be exercised over second home ownership and houses of multiple occupation so that good quality, affordable housing may be provided for those living and working in coastal and rural communities.

Targeted, tailored and focused interventions driven by different objectives and priorities are required

With respect to more people-based interventions, there are policy opportunities to raise aspirations and motivations and up-skill the workforce, particularly amongst children and young people, in order to build a future talent pipeline. Such action should be holistic in nature and target educational outcomes at all levels of childhood development and focus on family structures and career development and progression. Meanwhile health outcomes might be addressed through the creation of coastal and rural digital health hubs to facilitate innovation, development, and adoption of technologies and data processing for healthcare beyond the hospital, particularly in areas that are digitally immature and which have demographically older and geographically dispersed populations. **F**

Dr Alex Gibson, a senior research fellow at Plymouth University's Peninsula Medical School, also contributed to this piece.

It is no coincidence that accounts of the challenges faced by coastal communities so often refer to Blackpool, Brighton and Torbay which, by a coincidence of geography, are among the few local authorities that are predominately coastal in character.

Moreover, even more granular demographic and socio-economic data relating to lower- and middle- layer 'super output areas' and their Scottish equivalents is seldom useful. The lack of a detailed classification of small areas in coastal and rural areas means it is difficult to contextualise such data and, where analyses have been undertaken, for example by the ONS, the focus has been on undifferentiated categories such as 'larger coastal towns' and 'seaside villages'. The former places socio-economically challenged towns such as Skegness and Blackpool into the same category as the thriving seaside town of Bournemouth, whilst the latter conflates vibrant communities such as Bambergh with highly deprived localities such as Jaywick. This sort of categorisation does little to help us understand why health, educational and other socio-economic outcomes tend to be so poor in coastal areas, and it does not help us focus on the specific factors operating in different localities.

Finally, and crucially, coastal and rural communities will often have more in

common with populations facing similar circumstances elsewhere in the country than they will with other communities within their local authority. In other words, the need for shared policy development and learning cuts across, and is not well served by, the political and administrative geography of the country.

Policy opportunities

Opportunities for addressing the needs of the UK's coastal and rural communities must first and foremost respect their disparate geography and lack of political and organisational cohesion. The launch of a national coastal and rural strategy and evidence-based policy unit would address their disparate geographies and lack of political and organisational cohesion, and help overcome the challenge of working across different levels of administration, multiple government departments and a variety of non-governmental stakeholders. All have their own priorities and are constrained by their own tightly defended funding envelopes. Such a unit would be tasked with ensuring policy makers collaborate across portfolio boundaries to advance the needs of coastal and rural communities.

Targeted, tailored and focused interventions driven by different objectives

Stepping up

Voluntary and community organisations have a huge role to play in addressing the challenges of rural Britain, writes *Chris Cowcher*



Chris Cowcher is head of policy and communications at the Plunkett Foundation

ROLLING HILLSIDES, THE odd farm building, a church, a village shop and some historic housing stock; this tranquil vision is what springs to mind for many when they think about rural communities. From policy makers to funders and from the media to the business sector, there appears to be an assumption that rural areas are generally affluent places with very few real issues or needs to be addressed. This long-standing misrepresentation, epitomised by the fact that there has been no rural White Paper published by any government since 2000, has put the countryside at risk of being left behind and in great need of new investment and greater support if it is to become a place that is accessible to all.

The reality for those living in rural communities is that they face many challenges – challenges which are often hidden, both in cultural representations of rural life and by the methods and metrics used to identify deprivation and need. New research published earlier this year by Pragmatix, on behalf of the Rural Services Network, illustrated how national statistics used to identify community need often mask the real challenges that exist in many rural areas. Pragmatix’s study made the case that if rural areas comprised a region, rather than a disparate set of communities, it would be the most deprived region in the country.

There has been such a significant loss of services in recent years that, unless they have access to private transport, rural residents now have poorer access to services based on minimum travel times than those living in urban areas. Coupled with increased transport costs, this has left large swathes of people at real risk of isolation.

It is also more expensive to live in these areas: rural house prices have risen faster than urban ones, with migration from urban centres and second-home ownership contributing to the increases. These costs are compounded by the fact that wages for rural workers are lower than for those living in urban areas, and that there are still large numbers of homes off the gas grid and so especially vulnerable to ever escalating energy prices. The reality is that the cost of working and living in the countryside is becoming ever greater.

There are also distinctly modern problems. Inconsistent broadband coverage and poor mobile phone connectivity deprive people of what is becoming, in a post-Covid age of flexible working and digital events, a basic human right. It makes it harder for local groups and residents to connect with people outside of their community and excludes residents from accessing schoolwork, online banking, health services, local updates and news.

Whilst much of the action needed to address the societal issues that exist in rural Britain will need to be led, supported and facilitated from the top down, there is also an essential role for the grassroots approach. People who step up to help others living locally are often the best placed to identify the most pressing problems and those most in need of support, helping to tackle the ‘hidden’ nature of rural need.

This community-led approach to action was never more apparent than during the phenomenal mutual aid response to the Covid-19 pandemic. As a recent report from the International Public Policy Observatory noted: “Communities don’t need mobilising: communities are the first responders in crises, outpacing voluntary or statutory agencies.” In rural areas their role is of greater importance still, as the community groups that are responsible for local services (including befriending, health, social, transport), buildings (such as places of worship, village halls, libraries) and businesses (e.g. retail, hospitality, food growth/distribution) are often the only such agencies operating in the area.

Community-led or parish plans, facilitated by organisations like Action with Communities in Rural England and their network, actively promote community consultations as a way of engaging people. These plans provide great frameworks for local

action, which often lead to development of or engagement with voluntary, community and social enterprise activity in response to a need. These social action plans have now morphed into neighbourhood development plans, with communities having more say on the natural and built environment around them, with social impact remaining an important consideration.

Community businesses supported by the Plunkett Foundation have a 94 per cent long-term success rate

Parish, community and town councils can play an important role in supporting community-led action UK-wide. They are the level of government closest to communities and can often be the convenor of support initiatives. Most importantly, they can raise and access funds that can be invested in or deployed to support locally led initiatives. There is huge potential for them to support the VCSE sector if this network of more than 10,000 councils can be reinvigorated and attract more councillors to get involved. Giving parish councils greater influence over planning and planning gain issues, working alongside local authorities, could be transformative for rural communities. Parish, community and town councils could represent their community's interests in respect of all future developments.

At the heart of many rural communities you will often find a village hall, church hall or another community building. These voluntary-run facilities house multiple local groups, host visiting statutory agencies and services and act very much as the 'hub' at the heart of their community. On an increasing scale they are also starting to host working spaces for local residents, facilitating meetings and training activities, and even co-locating with a local business. One particular type of business from the VCSE sector that is successfully operating alongside these buildings is the growing network of community-owned businesses.

Plunkett Foundation, a charity operating UK-wide, supports community-owned

businesses that are owned and run democratically by local residents. The charity has supported the creation of a huge range of rural 'community businesses' including village shops, post offices, pubs, cafes and multi-service hubs. A growing number are also co-locating within another community facility – including the local church. This model of business has enabled nearly 700 rural communities to create sustainable, commercial businesses, which are trading primarily for community and social benefit. Community businesses often replace private enterprises that have closed due to market failure. They are also a long-lived form of business. Community businesses supported by Plunkett have a 94 per cent long-term success rate, suggesting that they have created a model that is robust and agile in the face of external pressures.

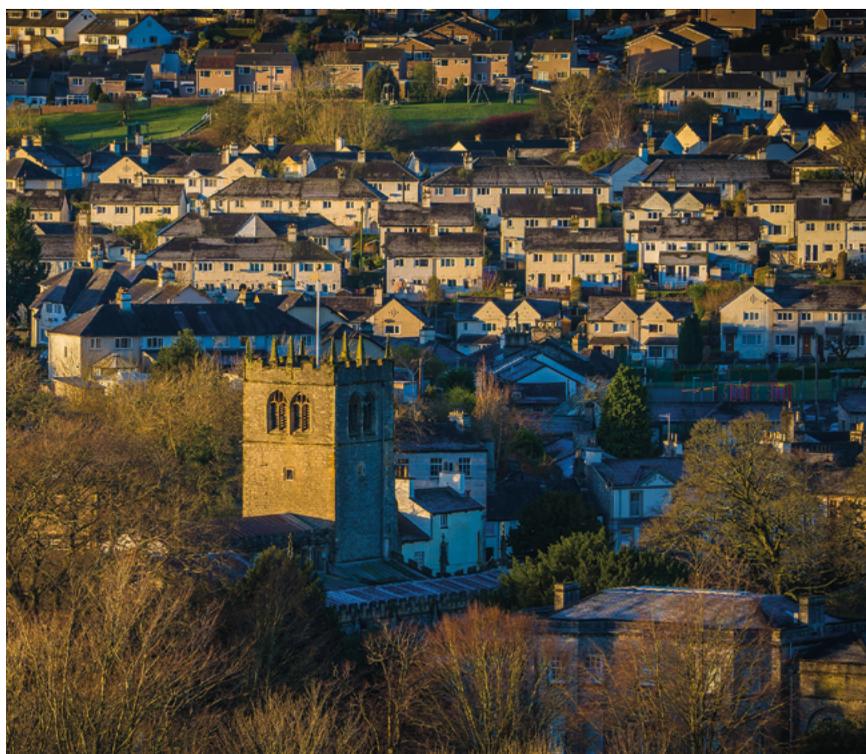
Community-owned businesses are rarely dependent on grants to sustain their operation. Whilst many utilise locally sold 'community shares' and require initial grant or loan funding to set up, their primary source of income is almost always from trading.

Plunkett promotes community-ownership as an opportunity for local residents to create inclusive spaces that are innovative in

their approach to operating and that are impactful in the services they provide. They contribute to climate action by providing local services and engaging with local producers and suppliers, and take steps to be environmentally conscious in their activities over the long term. As such they are a great example for the wider VCSE sector to learn from in rural areas.

What is needed to support more rural community businesses to set up in future? Here are a few key proposals:

- Produce a new rural White Paper or a rural strategy for government
- Protect and expand the scale of the Community Ownership Fund
- Incentivise social investment by extending social investment tax relief
- Empower more local residents to bring assets and businesses into community ownership through offering a community right to buy
- Provide sufficient funding for rural infrastructure bodies to facilitate community-led action. **F**



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Setting the standard

Rural areas don't have to get left behind. Just look at what has been happening in Wales, argues *Catherine Fookes*



Catherine Fookes is chair of Fabians Cymru and a Labour councillor and cabinet member for equalities in Monmouthshire. She is the Labour parliamentary candidate for Monmouth

POWER IN THE UK is concentrated in the hands of city dwellers. To our politicians, journalists, and business leaders, rural Britain is often valuable chiefly as a means of 'escape': a static, unchanging idyll which needs to be pretty, easily accessible from London, and not much else.

But rural communities are neither theme parks nor museums. They are an essential part of our economy and our society, and as we sit on the brink of a green transformation, are only set to become more so. If Keir Starmer forms a government after the next election, he will have to drive a radical reimagining of Westminster's relationship with rural and coastal communities.

Luckily, he need not look far for inspiration. Here in Wales, an ambitious Labour administration has been leading a rural revolution that puts local people at the heart of policy.

Take, for example, the second home ownership reforms announced earlier this year. For decades, the prevalence of second homes in Wales, often used as holiday homes and left empty for most of the year, has caused a severe housing shortage in rural and coastal communities. The sheer number of underutilised homes has not only a financial but also a profound cultural impact; housing shortages break up communities, and many of the most popular spots for second-home buyers are concentrated in Welsh language strongholds. The government's plans will allow councils to charge a council tax premium of up to 300 per cent on second homes, which would equate to their owners paying four times as much council tax as permanent residents.

Less eye-catching – but according to Mark Drakeford, more radical – is the accompanying new power of local authorities to classify properties as primary residences, second homes, or holiday lets, with planning permission required for a change of use.

Welsh Labour has also responded to the unique difficulties faced by rural communities as a result of the cost of living crisis. Homes in rural Wales tend to be less energy efficient, and households often use oil or liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) for heating, which leaves them without protection from the Ofgem price cap. The devolved government's Nest scheme, which provides funding for energy efficient home improvements, offers higher financial caps for households in rural off-grid areas. The poorest households can apply for further support through the government's longstanding discretionary assistance fund, which now provides a one-off £250 payment to pay for oil or three £70 payments to pay for LPG.

More fundamentally, Welsh Labour recognises the ongoing contribution of rural and coastal communities to Wales, and the importance of working with them towards a greener future. In March, the government announced £227m over three years to support Wales' rural economy and natural environment. The allocation framework moves beyond managing trade-offs between economic activity and environmentalism by recognising opportunities to work towards both sets of goals simultaneously; for example, by creating 43,000 hectares of new woodland, which will help move Wales towards net zero while at the same time

supporting the creation of a timber-based industrial strategy. The new funding will also support Welsh farmers – who manage around 90% of land in Wales – to invest in new technology, diversify their agricultural output, and grow environmentally beneficial crops like protein crops.

There are many challenges yet to be overcome. Productivity in rural areas has been on an upwards trajectory over the past decade but remains lower than in urban areas. Microenterprises predominate, which, while providing stability to communities, limits capital investment and training opportunities. Such structural issues are among the most intractable, but they are well understood by Welsh Labour, and their green transition plans should go some way to addressing them.

The current UK government is unlikely to learn much from Welsh Labour's successes – how many Tory ministers can imagine being priced out of their hometown, or spending their waking hours desperately trying to keep warm? – but fortunately for those living outside of Wales, Keir Starmer looks set to win the next general election. It is Welsh Labour's underlying approach, rather than specific policies, that Starmer should pay the most attention to: an approach that centres the concerns of local people and is not afraid to take radical action to address them, including, if necessary, significant market interventions.

It is time to radically rethink the status afforded to rural communities in policymaking – and, in doing so, put the whole of Britain on the path towards a fairer, greener future. **F**

Breaking barriers

The Tory approach to trade deals is selling out rural communities, writes *Nick Thomas-Symonds*



Nick Thomas-Symonds is the Labour MP for Torfaen and shadow Secretary of State for International Trade

“THE FIRST STEP is to recognise that the Australia trade deal is not actually a very good deal for the UK... the UK gave away far too much for far too little in return.”

This analysis of the Australian trade deal is brutal in its simplicity. What is even more troubling for the Conservative government is that the attack came from their own MP, George Eustice, the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who helped negotiate the deal. Such criticism should, however, come as no surprise to the current prime minister: after all, he himself called it ‘one-sided’ as he was touring the country in the summer looking for votes from the Tory membership.

Conservative ministers can’t pretend that they were not warned. Voices from across the agricultural sector warned time and time again about the potential impact. Yet Liz Truss, who was international trade secretary at the time, was more interested in securing Instagram photographs than agreements that delivered the best possible terms for the UK.

Of course, the Labour party wants to see a trade agreement with Australia that seeks to enhance our relationship; we have a deep shared history and Australia is a key global ally. Even better, it now has a Labor prime minister. We also have vital shared priorities such as the new Australia, United Kingdom and United States (AUKUS) defence agreement and our shared determination to tackling climate change – our relationship with Australia can only get more important. There are key areas in this trade agreement that can help to further that joint working.

More generally, in the Labour party, we realise the impact trade agreements can

have on rural communities. We are proud of our farmers and the standards of excellence they uphold. We know that high-quality UK produce can be a huge success in new global markets, but we also recognise the need for a level playing field for our farmers. That means it’s vital to get trade deals right and to strike a fair balance.

To do this, we need a hard-headed team of ministers, with a sense of mission, driving the best possible bargain.

The Conservatives should stop flirting with the idea that the way the UK succeeds is through watering down standards in key areas like environmental protections, animal welfare, climate commitments and workers’ rights. So many of the UK’s businesses and producers are global leaders because they deliver on the highest standards. A Labour government will support them by opening up new markets and supporting cutting-edge innovation and technology. We have so many competitive advantages to achieve this – like our scientific research, world leading universities and a global reputation for excellent produce – but we need a government that plays a strong hand in trade negotiations.

Under the next Labour government there would be no return to the single market or a customs union. Labour is determined to make Brexit work: we would tear down unnecessary barriers to trade, with a new veterinary agreement between the UK and EU that would help to ensure the fantastic produce we make can be delivered to our neighbouring markets, to help boost rural businesses.

We also know that too few areas outside of London and the South East benefit from the positive impact export-led businesses can provide. That is why Labour has set out

plans to help drive up exports and growth in every part of the country. We will set up climate export hubs in every region, helping ensure that the innovation developed through Labour’s Green Prosperity Plan will drive up exports based on climate science innovation.

In conjunction with this will be a new binding duty on trade negotiators to help deliver economic opportunities across the whole of the UK, alongside ensuring any new trade deal is accompanied by a regional strategy that would deliver support for every part of the UK to maximise trade benefits.

Between now and the next election, we will hold the Conservatives to account for their broken promises on trade. The prime minister recently confirmed that there is no trade deal with the United States forthcoming and no fixed date for any progress on a deal with India. The Conservatives will not deliver on their 2019 manifesto commitment to have 80 per cent of UK trade covered by free trade agreements by the end of 2022.

Britain is a great country and so much of what makes us respected across the world stems from our rural communities, like fantastic natural produce, agricultural innovation, beautiful landscapes and vibrant communities. However, no part of the country has been spared from the economic chaos created by this Conservative government: it has damaged living standards at home and tarnished our reputation abroad. On trade, we have seen broken promises and bad negotiation strategies put businesses at risk nationwide. This country can no longer afford a Conservative government and I am determined to do everything possible to deliver the change we so desperately need. **F**

Afterword

Labour can forge a united front of rural, coastal and urban communities, argues *Andrew Harrop*



*Andrew Harrop is General Secretary
of the Fabian Society*

THE AUTHORS IN this collection paint a picture of rural and coastal areas that too often goes unacknowledged: one of threadbare public services, widespread poverty, and communities threatened with extinction, culminating in what Sheela Agarwal and Sheena Asthana describe as “political and cultural dislocation”. What is strange, though, is how easily the illusion of rural tranquility and prosperity dissolves upon inspection. How has a vision so obviously untrue become so widespread?

Perhaps people living in towns and cities want to believe that someone, somewhere, has survived the last decade unscathed: that, heading out of town past the boarded-up shops and food banks, one might eventually reach a land untouched by the devastation the Tory project has wrought.

This instinct is understandable – surely someone must have benefited from the ‘tough choices’ made since 2010 – but it obscures the fact that rural and coastal communities have lost just as much, and are natural partners in an egalitarian, green, pro-devolution, political coalition. By challenging the image of coast and country presented by our urban-centric institutions, Labour has the chance to forge a unified front between rural, coastal and urban communities.

This united front will be necessary to tackle the most important issues ahead. Our natural landscapes and food production are both concentrated almost entirely in the UK’s rural and coastal regions. Any government trying to address the twin crises of nature and climate will fail if it does not understand the needs of countryside communities. As WWF argued this year at the COP27 climate

summit and the COP15 nature summit, fixing our food system is critical to preventing the further decline of nature and stopping catastrophic climate change in the UK and around the world. Earlier in 2022, the charity published the Land of Plenty report, which set out a path to decarbonise agriculture and land use while protecting nature and livelihoods, by changing the ways we farm and the food we eat. It proposed a target of halting and reversing the loss of UK nature by 2030 and reducing the UK’s direct agricultural greenhouse gas emissions by at least 35 per cent by 2030 and 51 per cent by 2050 (from 2018 levels).

A major theme of the contributions to this report is that protecting nature and investing in low-carbon jobs, land use, transport and technology can simultaneously alleviate local social and economic problems. For example, Jonathan Roberts discussed the critical problem of stagnant growth and productivity in coastal and rural areas, which Sheena Asthana and Sheela Agarwal link in their essay to the decline of traditional industries like agriculture – a problem that can often be addressed by more environmentally-conscious land use and farming practices. Investment in well-paid green jobs and renewables is also an important way to curb the cost of living crisis, which, as Mark Shucksmith, Jane Atterton, Jayne Glass and Polly Chapman point out, is particularly devastating in many parts of the countryside.

Graham Biggs identified the problems caused when discretionary spending by local authorities is cut, with one key outcome being worse public transport options. And this, as Silviya Barrett highlighted,

leaves rural people dependent on the polluting cars that we should, as a society, be moving away from. Chris Cowcher made the case for how voluntary organisations and community ownership can contribute to climate action through the provision of local services and engagement with local producers and suppliers. In each case, the policies that rural communities desperately need will also help realise a greener future.

The good news is that Labour has already been working hard to foster the nascent urban-rural coalition. In Wales, as Catherine Fookes documented, Mark Drakeford’s Labour government has been taking radical action to protect rural communities, while at the same time working to turn the countryside into the cornerstone of net zero. Across Great Britain, the new Fabian Society-YouGov poll shows that Labour has drawn level with the Conservatives in rural areas. The party has significantly increased its vote share even among rural homeowners and over-55s. And in rural target seats Labour leads the Conservatives by 18 percentage points.

The prize, however, is much greater than a single election win. By building a unified front spanning rural, coastal and urban communities, the next government can reshape the social and economic landscape of the UK and establish a structural shift more resilient than those brought about by the fall of the ‘Red Wall’ in 2019, the 1997 landslide or Margaret Thatcher’s right-to-buy revolution. The essays in this collection show what Labour needs to do, both before and after the next election, to secure such a political realignment. It is time for the party to heed the call. ■



This collection was supported by WWF UK, which has no editorial control over its contents. WWF is the world's leading independent conservation organisation. WWF's mission is to create a world where people and wildlife can thrive together. To achieve this mission, it is finding ways to help transform the future for the world's wildlife, rivers, forests and seas; pushing for a reduction in carbon emissions that will avoid catastrophic climate change; and pressing for measures to help people live sustainably, within the means of our one planet.

