

SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

Service provision in rural areas

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

Safeguarding and expanding rural proofing

- The Rural Services Network calls for rural proofing to be implemented from the start of the policy process and not only as a retrospective tool. Rural proofing should be a statutory requirement in policy development across all services
- The Rural Services Network also calls for rural proofing to be required to secure proportionate impact of policy across all rural areas, including remote and peripheral communities (and with a requirement for central Government to meet the additional ‘rural premium costs’ associated with servicing such areas).
- The Rural Services Network further calls for rural proofing to be extended to the regional and sub-regional levels of Government.

Delivering growth to rural economies and communities

- The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to make small business rate relief more accessible and strongly consider increasing relief to 100% of the rate burden for a limited time.
- The Rural Services Network supports the Rural Shops Alliance in its call for the return of a national scheme to support rural shops, post offices and pubs (akin to the former Vital Villages Programme) combining specialist advice with modest match-funded grants for capital investment
- The Rural Services Network, for economic, social and environmental purposes, calls on the Government to enable local authorities to support small rural business through the implementation of a comprehensive local procurement strategy which requires the authority to use local providers (including Third Sector bodies which already make a significant contribution in rural areas) wherever possible and financially viable

- The Rural Services Network supports the recommendations of the Taylor Review and, once again, urges their swift implementation.
- The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to back cost-effective skills initiatives in land-based and environmental businesses. We also call on the Government to ensure that these small rural businesses do not miss out on existing grant schemes for which they should be eligible but are too often overlooked

The digital future in rural communities

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

Safe, reliable and affordable transport solutions

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

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

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

Safeguarding rural schools

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

Affordable housing in rural areas

- The Rural Services Network welcomes the Taylor Review and, once again, urges the swift implementation of its recommendations
- The Rural Services Network calls for the remit and responsibilities of parish councils to be made clearer and more robust in the planning process with a clear responsibility to support and promote the provision of affordable housing in their area to meet the needs of local people where need is established.
- The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to make more watertight and add clarity to section 106 agreements; ensuring that the provisions are acceptable to funders whilst also protecting the local need and affordability requirements.
- The Rural Services Network strongly supports the Rural Housing Enabler Service and calls on the Government to make the service more widely available by providing financial support
- The Rural Services Partnership calls on The Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) to apply a greater degree of flexibility in applying the requirements of the Code for Sustainable Homes in rural areas where the costs of compliance are very substantial. The HCA also needs to recognise that scheme costs are higher in rural areas and should find better use of grant from within the total funds available to help meet those extra costs.
- The Rural Services Network calls on the government to make utility providers more accountable as they often cause unreasonable delays to rural schemes.
- The Rural Services Network repeats its call on the Government to ensure that lending institutions provide adequate funding to housing associations.
- The Rural Services Network supports the National Housing Federation's seven key actions needed to tackle the rural housing crisis

Health and social care in rural areas

- The Rural Services Network opposes the closure of local rural hospitals except on health safety grounds. Community Hospitals should be promoted and supported as a solution making a positive contribution to the health and care system in rural areas
- The Rural Services Network calls for the public funding (as is now the case in Scotland) of air ambulance services and for the Government to consider where these services might be expanded.

- The Rural Services Network supports the Institute of Rural Health's call for recognition that rural communities are diverse and different and that care provision therefore needs to be flexible, imaginative and require a very different, design, style and mode of delivery of health services. This will require attention to the way primary care teams are structured, the development of the role of the generic "rural health" worker and resources to implement appropriate and evidence-based telehealth initiatives
- The Rural Services Network calls for the establishment of more multi-use medical centres in rural areas providing a range of medical services. These could be configured as community outreach arms of local hospitals.
- The Rural Services Network calls for a stable statutory regulatory and financial framework in order to safeguard dispensing practices in rural areas
- The Rural Services Network calls on the Government to ensure that there remains an effective out-of-hours GP service in rural areas, essential to rural residents without access to private transport.

Overcoming rural fuel poverty

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

Robust flood defences

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