Rural Services Network
Sustaining Rural Communities

A Call for Action
March 2008

Rural Services Network
Delivering Rural Services

We would all like to be part of a safe, prosperous and healthy community. A community where everyone has the right to the same opportunities, freedom and respect. Somewhere we can be proud of.

www.communities.gov.uk

In May 2007, the Rural Services Network, a coalition of 250 public and private service providers, conducted a consultation exercise on the challenges facing rural communities. The responses to that consultation have shown that many of our rural communities do not deliver this quality of life. Improving on this position requires a clear call for action, which focuses the efforts of all those involved in the provision of services on the most significant challenges on the road ahead.

Having considered and codified the response to the consultation, the Rural Services Network identifies the following as being of critical importance to the future sustainability of towns, villages and settlements in the countryside:

Affordable Housing

Successive government reviews[1] have identified the availability of affordable housing as one of the most important needs of families and communities across England and Wales. This need is acute in many rural communities. Without the right mix of housing stock, the social and demographic mix of our rural communities is undermined. This has impacts on the workforce available to service public and private sector employers. School rolls decline and their existence, together with other local services, become increasingly unsustainable.

We welcome the Taylor inquiry[2] into affordable rural housing, in particular, the emerging proposals to allow small rural communities to take the lead in new provision, and to use the land use planning system to release and designate land[3].

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1. For example the Affordable Rural Housing Commission, May 2006.

2. Matthew Taylor Review on rural economy and affordable housing, launched December 2007, will report around July 2008. It will look at the following issues: The identification and release of appropriate land for local economic development and affordable rural housing provision, working in conjunction with local government, parish councils and land owners; Investigating the potential for increasing the provision of live/work space within rural communities; and Assessing the local implementation of new planning rules on rural housing following the recommendations of the Affordable Rural Housing Commission.

3. See the Taylor review December 2007 Call for Evidence.

We believe that communities, planning and housing authorities need to take a more pro-active role in identifying and bringing forward sites for affordable housing. Close collaboration with private landowners and 'market' house-builders is required to provide the appropriate mix.

We call for:

- The review of housing allocations in the Regional Spatial Strategies to address rural housing needs and affordability more effectively

- Amendments to planning legislation to introduce
  - mandatory targets for the provision of affordable rural housing, including
  - tax and development control incentives for land owners and private sector developers to provide an appropriate mix in new schemes: we will bring forward detailed proposals for what these might be

- The early implementation of the recommendations of the Affordable Rural Housing Commission[4], and a Government commitment from the Prime Minister to assume responsibility for, and act swiftly on, the findings of the Taylor review

- The new Homes Agency to work closely with the financial sector and registered social landlords to develop and promote effective 'shared equity rural mortgages'

- The development of a nationally recognised rural "affordable to buy" product – fundable by traditional mortgage lenders to promote full home ownership, but with stringent conditions to protect future affordability (upon resale) and local occupancy conditions

4. In July 2005 the Government set up the Affordable Rural Housing Commission (ARHC) to explore ways to improve access to affordable housing for those who live and work in rural areas. It reported in May 2006 with recommendations for national, regional and local organisations under the themes of planning, land and sites, funding, making better use of existing stock and implementation. The Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) contributed to this report and as part of its 'watchdog' role was tasked with monitoring the extent to which the ARHC's recommendations have been implemented. Its November 2007 report on progress in implementing ARHC found slow progress, especially at regional level, in addressing the need for affordable rural housing.

Rural Economic Development

Some of the poorest wards in the country are in rural areas – places like Cornwall[5] and Lincolnshire, where earnings are dramatically lower than the national average. In these geographically peripheral and sparsely populated areas, the rural economy is more fragile and susceptible to shocks than that of towns and cities. Flooding, animal disease and the decline of traditional rural industries (such as upland farming, mining and quarrying, fishing and manufacturing) are among the problems, which can contribute to a severe undermining of rural economic confidence.

The main policy instruments of Government – Regional Development Agencies and the new approach to economic development flagged by the Sub-National Review[6] – tend to focus on cities and urban areas as the providers of economic growth. The reality however is that rural areas are a core part of their sub-regional and regional economy[7]. It is misguided to believe that economic growth in rural areas will only be achieved by a 'trickle out' effect from economic gains in our cities. An approach to economic development which recognises the economic contribution (current and potential) of rural areas is required.

Rural areas need to be treated as part of a wider 'networked' economy. Those well connected to urban growth centres can make a substantial and complementary contribution to improved economic performance. Areas with weaker connections need support to add value to their local economic performance.
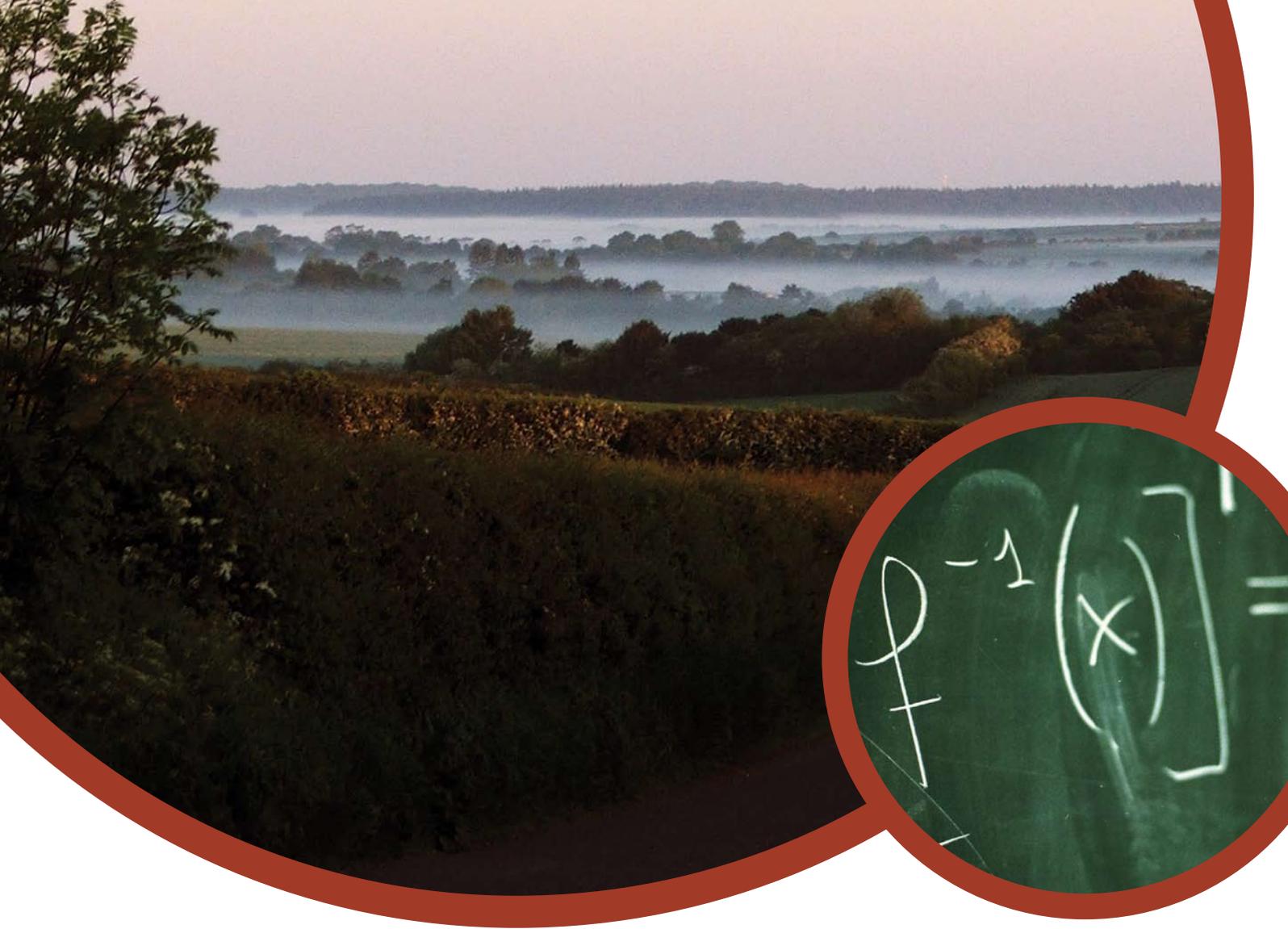
Investment in enterprise, innovation and skills should be made across England. In particular, the provision of relevant skills training and support for the development of young people (post-16) is critical to the maintenance of robust communities.

5. The GDP per capita in Cornwall is 62% of the national average. Cornwall is one of four UK regions that qualify for poverty-related grants from the EU (European Social Fund).

6. The review report published in July 2007 makes a number of changes to the delivery of economic development goals, including; Concentrating neighbourhood renewal funding more closely on our most deprived areas; A proposed new duty for local authorities to analyse the economic circumstances and challenges of their local economy; Supporting groups of local authorities in city regions to work effectively and accountably together through new Multi-Area Agreements (MAAs), and pool economic responsibility on a more permanent basis; Greater devolution to regions of powers to influence investment priorities; Sharpening the role of RDAs with a clear focus on increasing economic growth, with increased scrutiny by local authorities and simplified and strengthened performance management by central government.

7. Rural Innovation, NESTA, December 2007.

The (unfunded) cost of travel to and from further education acts as a strong deterrent to young people to develop their skills[8]. This is compounded by the significant additional time commitment to cover travelling and combine to create a real barrier to participation. This situation is being aggravated by the rationalisation and concentration of FE provision into urban centres. Equally, people of all ages from remote rural communities wishing to enter and progress through the labour market are facing the additional challenge of a steady reduction in the locality of Job Centre Plus offices.

We call for:

- A commitment from Regional Development Agencies and local government to take full account of the economic potential of all rural areas within their Economic Strategy's, investment and delivery plans

- The creation of a joint DEFRA/DBERR/HMT taskforce to review the impact of the RDA's activities on economic performance in their rural areas

- A commitment from DBERR & DCLG that skills training will be accessible to young people throughout rural areas and will be delivered locally

- Action to secure a significant closure in the gap between rural and urban broadband line speeds: rural customers are currently paying more for slower broadband, creating a digital divide between town and country[9]

- Government to commit to financially supporting those within the rural economy affected, directly or indirectly, by events such as flooding and animal disease so that they, and the rural economy, may quickly recover

8. See the report of the Institute for Public Policy Research on this, Should I Stay or Should I Go?
Rural Youth Transitions, and similar findings from Norfolk County Council's study, Rural Transport - Long Distance Learners.

9. See http://www.broadbandchoices.co.uk/rural-customers-languishing-on-expensive-deals-13122007.html

Sustainability in the Countryside

The challenges of sustainable (in the local and global sense) rural living are very different from those in town and cities. Maintenance and delivery of basic public services (i.e. waste collection and management) tends to be demanding and more costly[10]. Innovative partnerships have been formed in some areas to tackle this and deliver an integrated response.

The planning system too often discriminates against rural communities. Local planners are hidebound by guiding principles, such as the percentage of development, which must be delivered on brown-field land, restricting development to locations serviced by public transport, and the exclusive focus on 'growth centres' as locations for development. These all mean that most rural centres (including many market towns) are denied the opportunity to respond to changing circumstances. As a result their functionality is compromised, they become unbalanced and unsustainable.

Our urban population's expectations about the countryside providing an attractive environment for leisure and recreation are naturally high. The responsibility to meet these expectations has been passed (by Government) to land management organisations (National Parks, Natural England, Environment Agency) and local authorities (via their planning function). They in turn pass this responsibility to land owners, land managers, and those that live and work in the countryside. This brings an increasingly high burden of regulation and third party involvement in people's every day lives.

The paucity of public transport in rural areas means that multiple car ownership (for households) is a necessity not a luxury. Fuel for transport is generally more expensive in the countryside, which of itself creates issues relating to access to services. The limited range of options (natural gas, for example, is not available to a significant percentage of rural households), and increased cost of delivery means that increased fuel costs disproportionately affect those heating domestic and commercial premises[11].

We call for:

- DCLG to lead a fundamental review of the way that the planning system (including the Inspectorate) applies the test of 'sustainability' in rural areas

- Greater recognition in public policy (especially planning policy) of the challenges of sustainability – and economic potential-faced by countryside communities

- The development of sustainable and innovative transport solutions for rural communities, for example, demand responsive public transport

- An increasing emphasis on support for the role farming plays in maintaining the rural environment

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10. See the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee - Fifth Report, July 2007, which heard evidence that waste collection costs in rural areas could be 90% higher than in urban areas.

11. EnergyWatch has identified living in a rural area as one of seven key contributors to consumer vulnerability: Consumer vulnerability and the energy sector.

Vulnerable Rural Communities

Individually and collectively, rural communities can be considered vulnerable on a number of levels, and policy instruments are needed to mitigate the threats they face.

The consequence of rural areas becoming popular retirement destinations and unpopular places for young people making their way into work is a dramatically ageing demographic profile. This will bring increased demands for health and social care provision[12], often more expensive and harder to deliver in the countryside than elsewhere.

Many rural communities (horticultural areas[13] in particular) have also welcomed substantial numbers of migrant workers. The social, educational and housing needs of this workforce significantly impact on the budgets of local service providers. This increased liability is poorly recognised by funding formula and central Government.

Collectively, communities can be undermined by the loss of key services, including village schools, shops and pubs, post offices[14] and small hospitals. Centralised or regionalised policy-making, driven by the instinct to rationalise or consolidate provision, militates against local service provision. The loss of such services not only affects the long-term viability of a community, but also directly impacts upon the quality of life of its residents[15]. The requirement to make more, longer journeys is being steadily increased, and with it the cost and unsustainable nature of living in the countryside.

We call for:

- Residents in sparsely populated rural areas to be treated as an 'equality' group by public service deliverers, local authorities and Local Strategic Partnerships

- A ring-fenced budget for energy efficiency grants for rural homes, provided through the Energy Saving Trust, with grants at a level appropriate to the higher costs prevailing in rural areas

- A presumption in favour of the equitable provision of public and private services to rural communities as being both a duty owed by the public sector to the community, and also an active and valued form of corporate social responsibility

- Development of the model of Asset-Based Rural Community Development, where publicly owned assets are transferred to community ownership[16]

- The halting and reversal of the rural post office closure programme

- The active retention of small village schools where these serve isolated communities
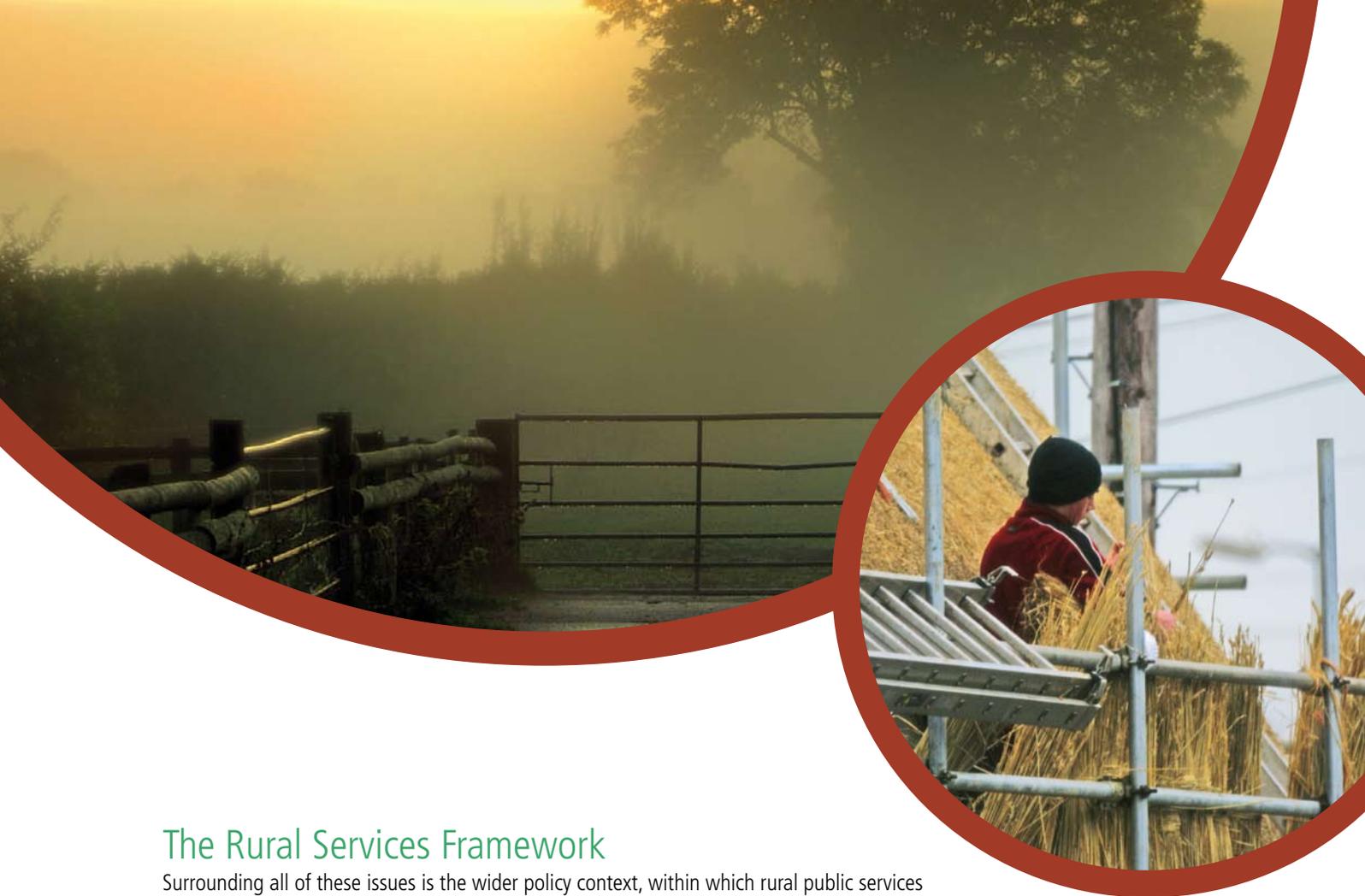
12. See "The Ageing Countryside: The growing population of rural Britain"., Age Concern, April 2006.

13. See MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE EAST MIDLANDS LABOUR MARKET, East Midlands Development Agency, January 2007.

14. The current closure programme is well documented. There are 14,609 Post Office branches in the UK (as at end March 2005), with around 8,037 of those situated in rural areas. The rural post office network serves approximately 12 million customer visits a week, with 84 per cent of people in rural areas living within one mile of a post office. In addition, over two-thirds of villages with between 500 and 1,000 inhabitants have a post office. This large branch network enables the Post Office to provide convenient access to a range of services. All of this is under threat.

15. See research by Voluntary Action Cumbria into the Impact of Service Withdrawal on rural communities: http://www.ruralcumbria.org.uk/community/ruralservices.html.

16. The proposals in the June 2007 report of the Carnegie Commission for Rural Community Development are particularly well argued, and supported by Rural Services Network.

The Rural Services Framework

Surrounding all of these issues is the wider policy context, within which rural public services are delivered.

It is well established that the cost of delivering rural services[17] can be significantly higher than that in urban and suburban areas. Population dispersal and settlement patterns make this so. But new factors are coming into play as discussed above: an ageing population, low GDP per capita, limited employment opportunities and the need to accommodate migrant communities are all adding significantly to service deliverers cost burden. The Government's resource distribution formulae consistently fail to recognise this increased cost.

There has been much talk in recent years of the need to 'rural proof' policies, but all too often, rural needs are tacked on to policy as an afterthought, often when it is too late, and the problem they are seeking to address has taken root. By way of contrast, urban problems are often at the centre of metropolitan policy-makers thinking, and as such attract the attention and resources the countryside craves.

Government and other service providers have every opportunity to use the Defra/former ODPM urban/rural spatial definition when developing and crucially, monitoring the impact of public policy and service delivery.

The definition should also be applied in the course of Local Area Agreement negotiations conducted on a countywide basis, to avoid the risk of outcomes 'smoothing over' a failure to deliver on the needs of the most rural communities covered by the LAA.

Defra's has proposed that 'rural/urban' reporting against the new National Indicator set[18] should be taken on by Government and enforced by the Audit Commission, as part of the Comprehensive Area Assessment process.

As things stand, we are concerned that efforts to 'rural-proof' public policy have failed.

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17. See THE EFFECTS OF RURALITY ON THE COSTS OF SERVICE PROVISION, SPARSE, September 2006.
18. http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/nationalindicator

More rigorous and consistent analysis is needed of the state and scale of services in the countryside. The continuing decline of local services is entirely contradictory to the growing demand to live in the countryside, and to the increased needs for services and support from the private and public sectors alike.

We call for:

- A systematic assessment and recognition of the additional costs of providing services in rural areas, meeting rural needs, in the distribution of public funds for the provision of services

- The ODPM / DEFRA rural / urban definition to be applied to the planning, delivery and performance assessment of public services. Specifically all district level data should be 'dis-aggregated' using the rural / urban definition when negotiating improvement targets in LAAs, monitoring performance of LAAs and against PSA targets and within the Comprehensive Area Assessment

- The mainstreaming of measures to tackle rural deprivation across all relevant Government public service agreements

- A high-level commitment across Government to sustaining balanced and vibrant rural communities, stable for all for the long-term.

Rural Services Network
March 2008

The following organisations are members of the Rural Services Network.

NATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE)
Association of Community Rail Partnerships (AcoRP)
Analytica Consulting Services Limited
Arcadia Housing Group
Arriva Trains
Association of Public Service Excellence
Association of Train Operating Companies
British Bus Company
Bus Users UK
Business in the Community
Campaign for the Protection of Rural England
Carnegie Trust
Calor Ltd
Central Trains
Church of England
Community Transport
Consumer Council for Water
Commission for Rural Communities
Development Trust Association
Energywatch
English Rural Housing Association
Federation of Petroleum Supplers
First Great Western
First Group Bus Co.
Forestry Commission
General Dental Council
Great North Eastern Railway Company (GNER)
Hastoe Housing Association
Inland Waterways Amenity Advisory Council
Institute of Economic Development
Institute of Rural Health
Istop Community Kiosk
Joseph Rowntree Foundation
Lantra Business Development and Advise Company
Law Centre Federation
Market Towns Association
MIND
National Association AONB
Museums Library and Archives Council
NACAB
National Association of Local Councils
National Association for Voluntary and Community Action
National Express Ltd

National Farmers Union
National Federation of Enterprise Agencies
National Federation of Sub Postmasters
National Rural Touring Forum
Nene Housing Association
NHS Confederation
Northern Rail
Ofcom Consumer Panel
One Railway
Patients Association
Postwatch
Rural Cultural Forum
Rural Shops Alliance
Rural Solutions
Rural Youth Network
Ruralcity Media
Ruralnet UK
Sanctuary Housing Association
Spirita Housing Group
Stagecoach Group Plc
Start Here
St Mathew Housing
Trans Pennine Express
Travel Watch
Two Castles Housing
WRVS

REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Arts Council South West
East of England Ambulance Service Trust
East Midlands Ambulance Service Trust
Government Office for Rural Affairs, Team York and Humber
Great Western Ambulance Trust
Milton Keynes Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Learning & Skills Council
North West Ambulance Trust
South Central Ambulances
South Central Connexions
South Western Ambulance Trust
Sport England - Eastern Region
Sports England - South West Region
Sports England - West Midlands Region

Tees Esk & Weir Valleys NHS Trust
Thames Valley Police
Travel Watch South West
Yorkshire and Humber Rural Affairs Forum

COUNTY ORGANISATIONS

Buckinghamshire
Aylesbury Vale District Council
Cornwall Partnership Trust
Milton Keynes Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Learning@
Skills Council

Cambridgeshire
Fenland District Council
Huntingdonshire Regional College
Spalding and Peterborough Transport Forum
South Cambridgeshire District Council

Cheshire
Community Transport

Cornwall
Caradon District Council
Connexions Cornwall and Devon
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Primary Care Trust
Devon and Cornwall Business Link
Devon and Cornwall Criminal Justice Board
Devon and Cornwall Housing
Devon and Cornwall Probation
Kerrier District Council
North Cornwall District Council
Penwith District Council
Truronian Bus Company

County Durham
County Durham and Darlington Acute Hospitals NHS Trust
County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue
County Durham and Darlington Priority Services
and NHS Trust
Durham Police
Durham Police Authority
Teesdale District Council
Wear Valley District Council

Cumbria
Allerdale District Council
Copeland Borough Council
Cumbria Business Link
Cumbria County Council

Cumbria Fire and Rescue
Cumbria Primary Care Trust
Cumbria Police Authority
Cumbria Probation
Cumbrian Connexions
Eden District Council
North Cumbria Hospitals Acute Care and NHS Trust
North Cumbria Mental Health and Learning NHS Trust
South Lakeland District Council
Two Castle Housing Association

Derbyshire
Derbyshire Connexions
Derbyshire Police
Spirita Housing Group

Devon
Bicton College of Agriculture
Connexions Devon and Cornwall
Devon and Cornwall Criminal Justices Board
Devon and Cornwall Housing
Devon and Cornwall Probation
Devon County Council
Devon Fire and Rescue Service
East Devon District Council
Exmoor National Park Authority
Mid Devon District Council
North Devon College
North Devon District Council
Plymouth Acute Care and Foundation
Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Trust
Stagecoach Devon
Torridge District Council
West Devon Borough Council

Dorset
Dorset Fire and Rescue
Dorset Health Care Trust
North Dorset District Council
Purbeck District Council
West Dorset District Council

East Sussex
Wealden District Council

Essex
Maldon District Council
Uttlesford District
Council

Gloucestershire
Cotswold District Council
Forest of Dean District Council
Hartpury College
Royal Forest College
Tewkesbury Borough Council

Hampshire
Arcadia Housing Group

Herefordshire
Arcadia Housing Group
Herefordshire Council
Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service
South Shropshire Housing Association
West Mercia Police Authority
West Mercia Probation

Lancashire
Lancashire Learning and Skills Council
Lancashire Police
Morecombe Bay Hospitals NHS Trust
North Lancs Primary Care Trust
Ribble Valley Borough Council
Surestart Early Years Service Lancashire County Council
Trans Pennine Express

Leicestershire
Harborough District Council
Leicestershire Police
Melton Borough Council
Melton Community Partnership

Lincolnshire
Boston Borough Council
East Lindsey District Council
Lincolnshire and Rutland Business Link
Lincolnshire and Rutland Learning and Skills Council
Lincolnshire County Council
Lincolnshire Fire and Rescue
Lincolnshire Probation
North Kesteven District Council
North Lincolnshire Council
South Holland District Council
South Holland Rural Action Zone

South Kesteven District Council
Spalding & Peterborough Transport Forum
West Lindsey District Council

Middlesex
Hastoe Housing Association
Patients Association

Norfolk
College of West Anglia
East of England Learning and Skills Council
Easton College
Great Yarmouth College
Kings Lynn & West Norfolk Borough Council
Norfolk Green Bus Company
Norfolk Primary Care Trust
Norfolk Probation
North Norfolk District Council
South Norfolk District Council

Northamptonshire
Daventry District Council
East Northamptonshire District Council
Nene Housing Association
South Northamptonshire District Council

Northumberland
Alnwick District Council
Berwick- upon-Tweed Borough Council
Berwick upon Tweed LSP
Connexions Northumberland
Northumberland Business Link
Northumberland Fire and Rescue
Tynedale District Council

Nottinghamshire
Newark and Sherwood District Council
Nottinghamshire Health Care NHS Trust
Nottinghamshire Police

Oxfordshire
Milton Keynes Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire LSC
Oxfordshire Ambulance Service
Thames Valley Police
West Oxfordshire District Council

Rutland
Lincolnshire and Rutland Business Link
Lincolnshire and Rutland Learning and Skills Council
Rutland County Council

Shropshire
Bridgnorth District Council
North Shropshire District Council
Oswestry Borough Council
Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Council
Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority
Shropshire County Council
Shropshire Partnership
Shropshire PCT
Shropshire Rural Housing Association
South Shropshire District Council
South Shropshire Housing Association
Walford and North Shropshire College
West Mercia Police Authority
West Mercia Probation

Somerset
Arcadia Housing Group
Connexions Somerset
Exmoor National Park
Mendip District Council
North Somerset PCT
Sedgemoor District Council
Somerset County Council
Somerset Learning and Skills Council
Somerset Partnership NHS and Social Care Trust
South Somerset District Council
West Somerset District Council

Suffolk
Arcadia Housing Group
Babergh District Council
Forest Heath District Council
Mid Suffolk District Council
St Edmundsbury Borough Council
Suffolk Coastal District Council
Suffolk Probation

Warwickshire
North Warwickshire Borough Council

Stratford Upon Avon District Council
Warwickshire College

West Sussex
Chichester District Council
Chichester in Partnership

Wiltshire
Arcadia Housing Group
Kennet District Council
Salisbury District Council
South Central Connexions
Great Western Ambulance Trust
Wiltshire and Swindon Learning and Skills Council
Wiltshire College
Wiltshire County Council
Wiltshire Criminal Justice Board
Wiltshire Fire and Rescue

Worcestershire
Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue
Malvern Hills District Council
West Mercia Police Authority
West Mercia Probation
Wychavon District Council

Yorkshire (North, East Riding, South, West)
Askham Bryan College
Craven District Council
East Riding Council
Hambleton District Council
North Yorkshire Business Link
North Yorkshire County Council
North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue
North Yorkshire Probation
Richmondshire District Council
Ryedale District Council
Scarborough and North-East
Yorkshire Healthcare Trust
Scarborough Borough Council
West Yorkshire Business Link
Yorkshire Cultural Consortium
York and North Yorkshire PCT

The Rural Services Network is a group of more than 250 organisations working together to improve the delivery of rural services across England.

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