The Rural Challenge: Achieving sustainable rural communities for the 21st century

Overview

The Rural Coalition’s Rural Challenge report aims to present a shared policy agenda for rural communities. In light of the coalition government’s plans for referenda - which would require 90 per cent community support before new, small-scale development can go ahead in villages - the Rural Coalition has set out its own proposals on how to save rural communities from imminent spending cuts and unaffordable housing. This would help rural citizens who are already paid 20 per cent less than their urban equivalents. The report groups its key findings on how to tackle these problems into six areas: creating and sustaining rural communities, meeting rural housing needs, building thriving rural economies, delivering great rural services, flourishing market towns and empowering communities.

Briefing in full

Context

The Rural Coalition was formed in September 2008; it was set up in response to concerns for the future of rural communities in England. The coalition comprises the following organisations:

- Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE)
- Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE)
- The Country Land and Business Association (CLA)
- The Local Government Group (LG Group)
- The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)
- The Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA).

The organisations involved came together with the support of the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) to launch a prospectus, *The Future is Rural Too*. It set out the common concerns and initial proposals for a new approach to empowering and protecting rural communities in the face of environmental challenges and financial and social changes. The Chair of the Coalition, Matthew Taylor, who led the review on affordable housing and rural economies, described the precarious times rural communities are facing, “On its current course, with no change in policy and no commitment to action, much of the countryside is becoming part dormitory, part theme park and part retirement home”. Additionally, several worrying statistics were unearthed in the initial prospectus. It was found that:

- 315,506 households in predominantly rural districts were on local authority housing waiting lists, but the proportion of affordable homes in rural areas is little more than half that in urban communities.
- Rural England is more dependent on public sector jobs than urban England. On average 33 per cent of jobs in predominantly rural authorities are public sector, compared with 27 per cent for other authorities. That means that as public spending is cut back, the economic, employment and service delivery impacts are potentially greatest across rural communities.
Halting the Referenda

The Rural Challenge report opposes the coalition government's commitment to referenda. It is feared that they would undo the support the Government's Community Right to Build proposals would lend to rural communities, due to the amount of resources the referendums would soak up in developing community support. The Community Right to Build proposals were outlined last month by housing minister Grant Shapps and are set to be included in the forthcoming Decentralisation and Localism Bill. Making sure these proposals remain unhindered would allow communities in rural areas to build homes, shops and other facilities without requiring planning permission. In place of the referenda, the Rural Challenge report suggests that parish councils should be the designated guardians for small community-led planning and infrastructural developments, supporting and reinvigorating a planning system geared to meeting local needs. Additionally:

- the report calls for the reform of the Housing Revenue Account so that councils are able to keep money from the sale of council homes, which would help local authorities address the need for new housing for young families and low-income households in rural areas.
- the report states that the government should be held to full account on the impact of public sector funding cuts on rural areas before finalising the Spending Review in October.

Summary of key areas in The Rural Challenge report

The six key areas the report covered went into much more detail and dove tailed with references to the final recommendations. Below are some of the key findings and recommendations found in the report.

1. Creating and maintaining sustainable communities

   - Local Planning Authorities should draw up local plans and strategies which are based on a thorough understanding of local rural economies and society.
   - Clearer messages are required to present the reduced national planning policy framework. It supports and reflects the overriding objectives of building and maintaining thriving sustainable rural communities with the genuine engagement and involvement of local people.

2. Meeting the affordable housing needs of rural communities

   - The Community Right to Build and local policies giving effect to it, should enable schemes to include one or more of the following elements, dependent on the needs identified by the community: market housing, affordable housing, workspace, retail space, recreational space, community facilities, and sites for renewable energy production.
   - The forthcoming Decentralisation and Localism Bill should rule out “clearly vexatious or trivial” village green applications blocking community development.

3. Building thriving rural communities

   - Significant rural territory Local Enterprise Partnerships should ensure that people in rural areas (including sparsely populated and peripheral areas) have a strong voice, and that there are specific strategies and programmes for enterprise and employment in rural areas.
   - Local Government should promote, protect and maintain a good supply of appropriate sites and premises for all kinds of businesses in smaller rural communities, including new build and conversion of farm buildings and farm diversification.

4. Delivering great local services

   - The Community Right to Build bid needs to encompass community-led initiatives that extend the reach of public services or provide partial solutions to retaining local provision as well as
like for like services via commissioning.

- Local and strategic transport planning should take greater account of access issues for dispersed rural communities and consider innovative programmes supporting community solutions at less cost.

5. Flourishing market towns

- Local authorities should always involve the community in shaping sustainable proposals through effective participation such as Enquiry by Design and Planning for Real.
- The LG Group, the TCPA, the RTPI, CPRE, and CABE (the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) will work together with other relevant bodies on help and advice to develop market towns in ways which produce attractive and sustainable settlements, building on the excellent standards set by the Eco-towns PPS.

6. Empowering communities

- To deliver the Big Society, localism and empowering communities, the government needs to start by building local capacity for delivery – for example through support for local enablers and activists, advice and training, and modest funding opportunities.
- Local Authorities should recognise that there will often be a very strong case for individual communities obtaining visible benefits, community facilities and community-led services from accepting more development in their area, to support community facilities and community-led services. The forthcoming Decentralisation and Localism Bill should ensure that there are straightforward mechanisms to enable this.

With the report finalised, members of the Rural Coalition are still working to build partnerships with relevant bodies to influence the thinking and behaviour of national and local politicians and planning professionals. Rural Challenge demonstrates good ways of using new freedoms at local level to meet the high-level tests set in national policy, and best practice material highlighting successful approaches.

Comment

For rural communities to survive, positive actions need to come from local government and agencies, together with the voluntary and community sectors, including the members of the Rural Coalition itself. Community-led planning is the key to this approach i.e. the solutions will need to come from the bottom up as well as the top down. Only if people in rural communities have ready access to local schools, local jobs, local shops and pubs and affordable homes will they and their children thrive.

The Rural Coalition believes the government's commitment to localism and the Big Society opens the door to those reforms - but as yet there is a very real risk that in practice cuts will fall heaviest in rural communities which may lose services altogether, and opportunities will be missed to make rural communities prosper. Furthermore, the press have picked up on the worry expressed by the Rural Coalition regarding the government's referenda. Potentially a handful of nimbys could disrupt the Community Right To Build bill, blocking the development of new homes in rural areas, and killing off the post offices, schools and pubs (the former being widely considered as the social hub of village life).

---

External links

Rural Coalition's Rural Challenge report