



Department  
for Environment  
Food & Rural Affairs

# Delivering rural opportunity

## The third report on rural proofing

March 2024



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# Foreword

The government is committed to putting the needs of people and businesses in rural areas at the heart of policymaking, ensuring they can benefit fully from new economic and social opportunities while preserving and protecting their essential character and uniqueness.

Our aim is to enhance the quality of life for people living and working in the countryside, tackling disadvantage and harnessing the rich human, economic and natural potential that exists across rural England. Rural proofing is an essential tool in achieving this aim. Defra, as lead department for rural affairs, works across government to ensure that we take account of rurality when designing and implementing policies, considering factors like sparsity, distance and connectivity.

This third report on rural proofing highlights the progress that we have made across government since the last report was published and builds on our June 2023 policy statement **Unleashing Rural Opportunity**, which outlined a significant package of measures targeted at supporting rural people and businesses to achieve their potential.

Since then, many of these commitments have been delivered, including important actions on planning and infrastructure such as the new National Planning Policy Framework, published in December, which supports rural exception sites to ease affordable house building in areas where it is most needed and the November publication of our Connections Action Plan, which sets out a pathway to speed up connections to the grid, underpinning rural productivity and growth.

In October, the Department of Transport published their **Future of Transport** document, which looks at how rural areas can be supported to harness the potential of new technologies and innovations emerging within the transport sector.

On health, our Dental Recovery Plan lays out how we will improve access to NHS dentistry across the whole country and the NHS Workforce Plan outlines important reforms that will be needed to reduce supply gaps and improve retention across England including in rural areas.

We are also continuing our support for essential community infrastructure through our new smaller grants' element to the Platinum Jubilee Village Halls Fund and the announcement of an additional £5 million support for village halls made by the Chancellor in the budget in March this year.



**Robbie Moore MP**

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

# Executive summary

This is the government's third report on rural proofing. It highlights the progress that has been made in the period since the last report was published in September 2022 and builds on the **Unleashing Rural Opportunity** document, published in June 2023, which spelt out the government's plan to level up rural areas and its ongoing commitment to support rural people and businesses to achieve their potential.

This report provides an update against key funding, policy and delivery commitments, using data and information gathered from across government and from the Statistical Digest of Rural England, a publication split into seven thematic documents that delve into patterns that highlight the difference between rural and urban areas. The report is structured around the four key themes identified in **Unleashing Rural Opportunity**:

**Growing the rural economy** - We will support rural areas so they can prosper, including by boosting opportunity through jobs and skills.

**Connectivity** - We will continue to deliver gigabit broadband and mobile coverage in rural areas and increase access to public transport.

**Homes and energy** - We will facilitate the building of more homes for local people to buy where local communities want them, powered by secure and resilient energy supplies.

**Communities** - We want rural communities to continue to be places where people want to live and work. We will improve access to high quality health and social care and take further action to tackle rural crime.

## Growing the rural economy

The government is taking a range of action to help realise the significant potential for growth that exists in the rural economy. This includes direct investment, for example through our levelling up grant schemes and support for food and farming. We are also working to support the sustainable development of the visitor economy and the provision of skills and training opportunities.

Delivery of the government's Levelling Up agenda is underpinned by significant investment, notably the £4.8 billion UK Shared Prosperity Fund. To address the specific challenges faced by rural areas we have also supplemented this funding with an additional £110 million through our Rural England Prosperity Fund, which supports rural businesses and community infrastructure.

The government also recognises that farming is at the very heart of the rural economy and continues to support and invest in farming, standing by its manifesto commitment to invest £2.4 billion per year in England for the rest of this Parliament. EU land-based subsidies are being phased out and new schemes that work for farmers, food production and the environment have been introduced. The Sustainable Farming Incentive now includes actions relating to soil health, hedgerow management, providing food and habitats for wildlife, and managing pests and nutrients.

More broadly, we have introduced measures to help with the impact of the reduced supply of fertiliser; improved the Avian Flu compensation scheme for farmers; provided over 17,000 farmers with advice through the Farming Resilience Fund to help with transition period from BPS to the ELMS.

## **Connectivity**

Improving digital connectivity is a fundamental underpinning for the future prosperity and wellbeing of rural communities and businesses. It is not only an economic necessity, but also a matter of social justice. As more services, both public and private, are delivered electronically, those living in rural areas must be able to get online.

The Wireless Infrastructure Strategy was published in April 2023 to drive deployment of advanced wireless connectivity across the UK. The strategy announced the launch of a number of schemes such as 5G Innovation Regions, aimed at 5G stimulating investment, and announced the appointment of Simon Fell MP as Rural Connectivity Champion, to support rural businesses to access and adopt the digital connectivity they need to encourage commercial investment in 5G and support economic growth. Through Project Gigabit, the government is investing £5 billion so hard-to-reach areas can have access to lightning-fast gigabit-capable broadband and to date 162,600 rural houses and businesses have access to gigabit-capable broadband through scheme. Our target is to reach at least 85% gigabit-capable coverage by 2025, with nationwide coverage by 2030. We are also setting up gigabit hubs to connect vital local public services in hard-to-reach areas, typically for schools, libraries, and GP surgeries.

The £1 billion Shared Rural Network will also deliver 4G coverage to 95% of the UK's landmass by the end of 2025. We are also looking to develop new and innovative approaches to improve rural digital connectivity. In November 2023, DSIT was awarded £7.3 million of funding as part of the HMT Shared Outcome fund to develop a new Rural Connectivity Accelerator. This will deliver a set of pilot projects that enhance our understanding of the connectivity needs of businesses in rural and 'very hard to reach' areas of the UK and explore the best ways to address barriers to deployment and adoption. This project is in the discovery phase and is exploring the potential to launch up to 10 pilot projects in rural and remote areas.

The government is also supporting the provision of better transport options for people living and working in rural communities. We know that people living in rural areas often have further to travel for school or work, or to access personal and professional services such as healthcare and banking.

Supporting rural communities to access effective transport options is vital, which is why £300 million of government investment has been provided to protect bus services into 2025, keeping bus travel affordable. We are also trialing innovative demand-responsive minibus services in 15 local authority areas supported by the £20 million Rural Mobility Fund.

In October 2023, the Department for Transport published its **Future of Transport** document which shows how innovative and emerging technologies could address some of

the major challenges in rural communities. As part of this, the department is making up to £3 million of funding available for rural innovation. This will help explore innovative solutions to long-standing issues, such as loneliness and isolation, poor access to services and the financial challenges facing rural transport services.

### **Homes and energy**

A thriving, working countryside also depends on having sufficient affordable housing and a resilient energy network. We know people want to be able to stay in their local communities, while employers need a locally based workforce. However, the high cost of rural housing relative to earnings can result in people being priced out of their local area. This is bad for communities and for the local economy.

As part of the updated National Planning Policy Framework, published in December, the government is taking action through our Rural Exception Sites policy to allow the development of small affordable housing sites in rural areas where this not normally be permitted.

In 2023 we also announced £2.5 million of funding to support a national network of Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs) across England to boost the supply of new, affordable housing. The RHEs provide essential support to site owners and community representatives to navigate the planning system and help secure the support of local communities for developments.

Other significant policies include the consultation on permitted development rights, which closed in September 2023; and two consultations on short term lets, which closed in early 2023. Further announcements will be made in due course.

In terms of energy, as we increase the development of low-carbon and renewable electricity generation within the UK, we will also need to increase the scale and pace of development of the electricity transmission network. We published the Transmission Acceleration Action Plan in November 2023, setting out actions to accelerate construction of electricity transmission network infrastructure in response to the Electricity Networks Commissioner's report published in August 2023. Our community benefits proposals would also see wider benefits to support local projects of around £200,000 per km for overhead lines, £40,000 per km for underground cables, and £200,000 per substation.

### **Communities**

The government continues to support vital community infrastructure including community hubs such as village halls and public libraries. Such places play a key role in sustaining rural community networks and services and Defra is investing £3 million to support improvements to village hall facilities across the country and the £150 million Community Ownership Fund is supporting community ownership of pubs and shops, which has been more accessible to rural areas now that parish councils can make their own applications. Alongside this the Platinum Jubilee Village Halls Fund, a £3 million award for local communities has reduced their minimum bid to £2,000 allowing for smaller projects.

The government continues to recognise the pressure that some rural services are facing. As a result, there has been a significant increase in funding delivered through the Rural Services Delivery Grant, with a £15 million uplift taking total funding to £110 million from 2024 to 2025.

On health, we are committed to ensuring that everyone has access to good quality health and social care, wherever they live. That is why we are working for better and more accessible care in rural areas, such as by rolling out 160 community diagnostic centres often located in market towns, which can reduce the distances people need to travel. Additionally, the Dental Recovery Plan was published in February 2024 to recover and reform NHS dentistry and the government response to the EFRA Committee report on rural mental health was published in November 2023, highlighting the government's commitment to provide mental health services in rural areas, and to the Suicide Prevention Strategy.

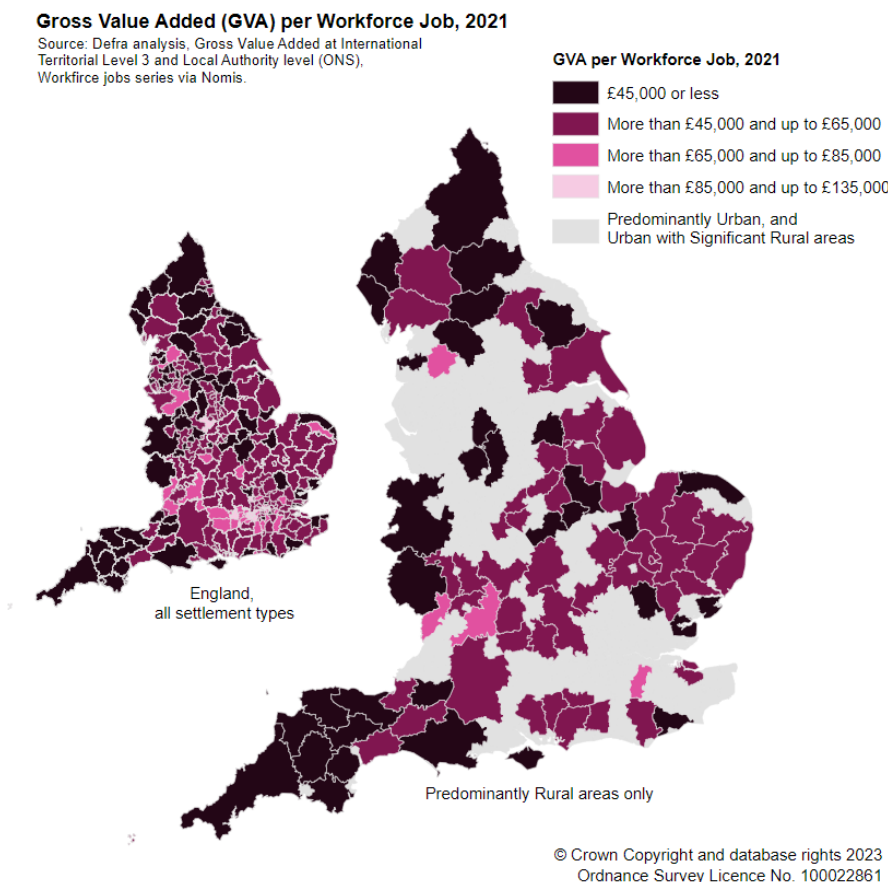
# Understanding the rural context

Our rural proofing policy and levelling up agendas are there to ensure that departments consider the specific challenges of rurality when designing and implementing their policies. Some of the factors which need to be taken into account are as follows.

## Rural productivity

The productivity rate (output per worker) in predominantly rural authorities tends to be behind the rest of the country. The average productivity rate (output per worker) in predominantly rural areas is 84% of the England average, and the gap has widened, driven in part an increase in London’s contribution to England’s overall productivity. 21% of the population of England lives in predominantly rural areas, but such areas contribute only 15% of output.

**Figure 1: Gross Value Added (GVA) per workforce job, 2021**



**Image description: map of England showing the GVA per workforce job from £45,000 or less to more than £85,000 and up to £135,000. Rural areas typically have a lower productivity than urban areas (England, 2021).**

## Digital connectivity

We have made significant progress on Rural broadband and mobile coverage although there is more to do in terms of:



- gigabit-capable broadband - 40% of rural premises have gigabit capable broadband (an increase of 10 percentage points since May 2022), compared with 80% of urban premises
- superfast broadband - 86% of rural premises have at least superfast capable broadband compared (1% more than in May 2022), compared with 98% of urban premises
- more than 99% of rural premises are at least able to access a decent broadband connection (that is a connection of at least 10 Mbit per second download and 1 Mbit per second upload) from either a fixed wired or fixed wireless access connection
- Mobile Network coverage - geographical 4G coverage of England from all four Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) is at 83% in rural areas and has remained at 97% for coverage from at least one MNO

## Accessibility

People living in rural areas can have further to travel for school or work, or to access personal and professional services such as healthcare and banking. They may have more limited travel options than those in urban areas and be more dependent on private cars. This can be reflected in:

- average weekly household expenditure on transport costs in rural areas is £94, compared with £70 in urban areas
- half the rural population living in areas that have the poorest accessibility to services based on minimum travel times, compared with 2% of the urban population

## Rural hardship

There is little difference in median earnings between those living in predominantly rural areas and those living in predominantly urban areas. However, median earnings for those working in predominantly rural areas are lower than for those working in predominantly urban areas, reflecting a number of factors, including the types of jobs available.

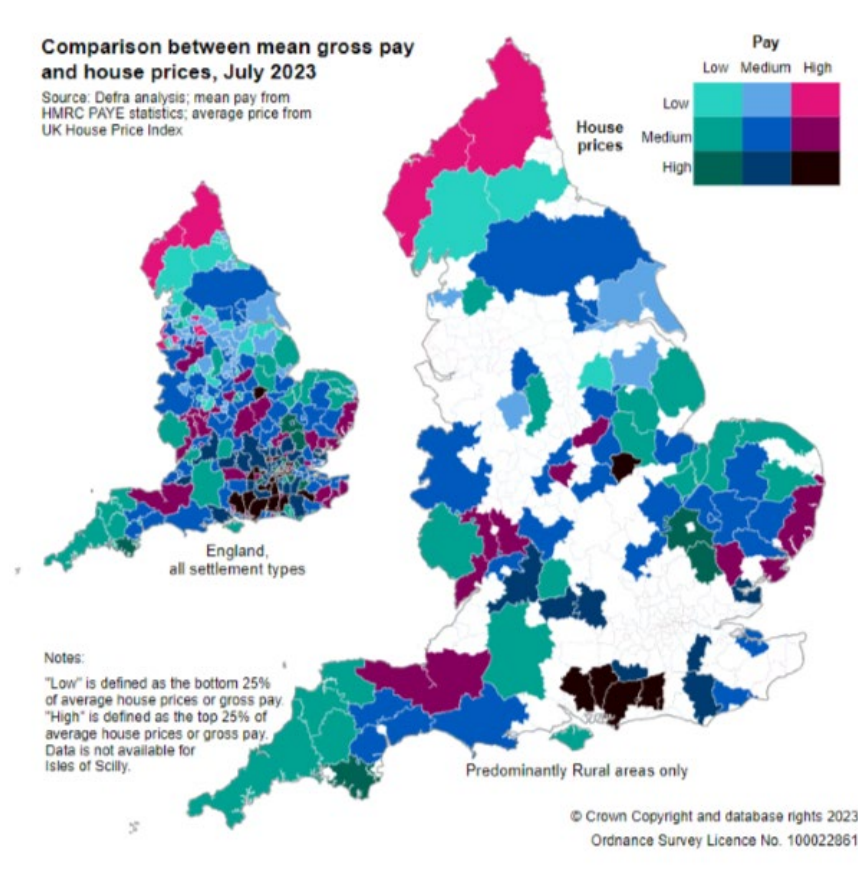
House prices are higher compared with earnings for those working in rural areas.

In 2022 the average lower quartile house price was 8.8 times the average lower quartile earnings of people working in predominantly rural areas. This compares with 7.6 times in predominantly urban areas (excluding London).

Fuel poverty is where a household is living in a property with a Fuel Poverty Energy Efficiency Rating of band D or below that cannot be kept warm at reasonable cost without bringing their residual income below the poverty threshold. In rural areas 1 in 4 households do not have a mains gas supply and hence are more likely to be reliant on oil or solid fuels for domestic heating and the relatively higher proportion of older housing stock can lead to less energy efficient homes. In 2022, the average fuel poverty gap (the reduction in fuel costs needed for a household to not be in fuel poverty) in rural villages, hamlets and

isolated dwellings was nearly three times as high as the average for England as a whole (£956 compared with £338).

**Figure 2: Comparison between mean gross pay and house prices, July 2023**



**Image description: a map of England showing the comparison between mean gross pay and house prices from low to high. In some rural areas the average pay is relatively low, coupled with house prices being relatively high. ‘Low’ is defined as the bottom 25% of average house prices or gross pay. ‘High’ is defined as the top 25% of average house prices or gross pay.**

## Data and research

Our understanding of rural opportunities and challenges is informed by data and research. This year, we have commissioned or contributed to:

- The **Rural Growth Toolkit**: a research project to build an analytical tool to support better policies for local economic development
- an evaluation of Defra grant funding (currently £1.7 million per annum to ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England) to support rural businesses and communities through its 37 county-based network members
- the English indices of Deprivation, following a commitment in **Unleashing Rural Opportunity**

Following our commitment in **Unleashing Rural Opportunity** to review and building an understanding of how deprivation in rural areas is measured, Defra and the Department for

Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) are collaborating to build the evidence base. Defra has contributed funding to investigate rural deprivation as part of DLUHC's recently commissioned update to the English Indices of Deprivation. This work will focus on considering what deprivation in rural areas is, data sources and methods to help quantify it and more formal guidance on the use of the Indices and their application to rural areas. Updated English Indices of Deprivation are anticipated in 2025.

## Levelling up

Levelling up rural areas is a critical aspect of the government's aims to tackle geographical disparities and spread opportunity across the UK. The Levelling-up and Regeneration Act (October 2023) formally enshrined the levelling up missions in law. The Act includes a duty for this government, and future governments, to have regard for the needs of rural areas when preparing a statement of levelling up missions.

In the same way that the policy levers to level up rural areas are dispersed across government, the rural perspective also cuts across each of the 12 levelling up missions. Whilst some of the levelling up missions already directly address the particular challenges of rural areas; others require more bespoke rural approaches. DLUHC is working with Defra and the Levelling Up Advisory Council, an independent body of experts, to advise Ministers on design and delivery of levelling up in rural areas.

## Growing the rural economy

We want to create the right conditions for realising significant potential for growth in rural areas we set out our action plan for building a prosperous and sustainable future for rural England in **Unleashing Rural Opportunity** (6 June 2023). As this report will show, the government invests substantially in the rural economy in many different ways including through its levelling up grant schemes and its support for food and farming. It also works to support the rural tourism and leisure sectors and to develop the skills of those working in rural businesses through training opportunities.

### Investment

The rural economy is eligible for investment from 3 separate levelling up funds.

All rural communities in the UK have been allocated a share of the **UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)** which will help people in places in need to access opportunity and support those who are economically inactive or whose skills needs that cannot be met through mainstream provision.

The £110 million [Rural England Prosperity Fund](#) supports rural businesses to develop new products and facilities, including farm businesses diversifying income streams, and improved community infrastructure. The REPF provides capital funding to:

- support new and existing rural businesses to develop new products and facilities that will be of wider benefit to the local economy
- support new and improved community infrastructure - it will provide essential community services and assets for local people and businesses to benefit the local economy

The Fund is being delivered by local authorities to ensure that this funding best supports local priorities. Funding allocations were confirmed to local authorities in April 2023, and local authorities are now working with rural business and community groups to develop projects.

The £4.8 billion **Levelling Up Fund** invests in infrastructure to improve everyday life across the UK, including regenerating town centres and high streets, upgrading local transport, and investing in cultural and heritage assets. The third round of the Levelling Up Fund will invest £1 billion in 55 projects across the length and breadth of Great Britain. This will build on the success of rounds one and two which saw £3.8 billion awarded to 216 projects across the UK. This included funding awards for rural areas.

### Food and farming

Agriculture plays an important part in the rural economy, particularly in more sparsely populated areas, and in shaping the rural landscape. We have committed to spending an average of £2.4 billion per year across this Parliament to support the farming sector in England in delivering food, jobs and environmental improvement. In May 2023, the Prime

Minister and DEFRA Secretary met representatives from across the whole UK supply chain for the UK Farm to Fork Summit. The summit focussed on how government and industry can work together to support a thriving UK food industry by bringing great British food to the world; building resilience and transparency; strengthening sustainability and productivity across the supply chain; and growing an innovative, skilled food and farming sector.

Fulfilling our commitment in **Unleashing Rural Opportunity**, we launched the **Smaller Abattoirs Fund** on 13 December 2023. The Fund will provide £4 million to help smaller abattoirs improve their productivity, enhance animal health and welfare, add value to the products they process and encourage investment in innovation and new technologies. It will directly support farmers by providing access to local private kill services maintaining choice in slaughter destination and facilities. It will also increase local employment opportunities and improve animal health and welfare through better on-site facilities and shorter journey times for livestock.

We are committed to ensuring that farmers receive government information and services in a timely and effective way. We have therefore focused on improving how we work with farmers with the aim of making the regulatory system fairer, more effective and more supportive of them.

We are investing to support the future development of agriculture and businesses in rural areas, including:

- the £5 million **Farming Innovation Investor Partnership** to encourage innovation in the farming sector supporting rural productivity and sustainability
- the **Farming Innovation Programme**, to boost productivity by providing funding for farmers and growers in England to adopt innovative methods and new technologies - to date we have launched 15 competitions valued at over £126 million
- the **Farming in Protected Landscapes programme** to fund farmers and land managers to work in partnership with National Parks and National Landscape bodies delivering outcomes for nature, climate, people and place - we have extended this programme until March 2025 and doubled the funding available to £100 million

## Visitor economy

Tourism is an important business sector in many rural areas, worth an estimated £11.5 billion and with the potential to create significant local economic growth. The government is working to maximise the benefits of the visitor economy for rural areas. VisitBritain is championing visits to the British countryside to a worldwide audience while the **Local Visitor Economy Partnership** (LVEP) programme is designed to encourage sustainable increases in visitor numbers and stay-lengths and to spread visits more widely outside metropolitan areas and more evenly across the year. To date, 26 LVEPs have been accredited including in the northeast, Yorkshire, Staffordshire, Cumbria and the Cotswolds.

Short term lets can be important in supporting the visitor economy, providing additional visitor accommodation. In 2023, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport held a consultation on proposals on the design of a **registration scheme for short-term lets in England**. This could help local authorities to manage the potential impact of short-term lets on local communities balancing a sustainable supply of visitor accommodation and local housing. The Government announced on 19 February that it will take forward a mandatory national scheme and that further details will be provided in due course.

The government is launching an ambitious new partnership between the national organisations for National Parks, National Landscapes and National Trails in some of England's most special places to remove barriers to access, boost private investment and support nature recovery to benefit rural communities and support the visitor economy.

We are working to complete the **King Charles III England Coast Path**. At around 2,700 miles, it will be the longest waymarked and maintained coastal walking route in the world and we have committed to the path being fully walkable by the end of 2024.



## Labour, training and skills

In 2022 the government commissioned an independent review of possible ways to tackle labour shortages in the food chain chaired by John Shropshire. The final report was published on 30 June 2023. The government will respond to this report shortly.

**Childcare provision** is important for economic growth and in **Unleashing Rural Opportunity** we highlighted our expansion of wraparound childcare for primary school-aged pupils with £289 million of investment. Parents should expect to see more availability of wraparound care from September 2024, and by September 2026 every parent who needs it should be able to access term-time wraparound childcare.

**Expansion of childcare entitlements** We are expanding the 30 hours free childcare scheme for working parents so they can access free hours from when their child turns nine months until they start school. From April 2024, eligible working parents of 2-year-olds will be able to access 15 hours childcare support, in September 2024 this will be extended to eligible working parents with a child from 9-months and from September 2025 eligible working parents in England will be able to access 30 hours of childcare per week.

**Skills Bootcamps** are free, flexible courses of up to 16 weeks, which give people the opportunity to build up sector-specific skills, with an offer of a job interview on completion. Skills Bootcamps in rural areas have included:

- construction skills, computer-aided design, HGV Driving
- electric or hybrid vehicle system repair and replacement
- construction
- food manufacturing excellence

Local areas have the flexibility to use 30% of their funding to deliver Skills Bootcamps in additional sectors to meet local needs.

The Department for Education provides a range of financial support for students to participate in post-16 education, including a **16 to 19 Bursary Fund** to help with costs including travel books, equipment, and trips. From this academic year onwards, allocations from the Fund use up-to-date disadvantage data and ensure institutions get more Bursary Fund if their students travel a long way or live in rural areas.

## Planning

In **Unleashing Rural Opportunity**, we set out how we wanted to make sure that the planning system reflected the needs of the rural economy by supporting rural diversification and growth. In July 2023 we launched a **consultation on possible amendments to permitted development rights** which included proposals to support rural enterprise through farm diversification and agricultural development. It covered reviewing the existing permitted development right that allows agricultural buildings to change use to a range of flexible commercial uses and amendments to two further rights which allow for a range of on farm development, which focused on the erection of new farm buildings and extensions. It also included a call for evidence seeking views in relation

to nature-based solutions, farm efficiency projects, and the diversification of farm incomes. Following consideration of the responses to this consultation the Prime Minister has committed to cutting red tape for farmers and introducing new legislation in April. Further announcements will be made in due course.

In July 2023, DLUHC launched the £29 million **Planning Skills Delivery Fund** to help local planning authorities, including those in rural areas, clear planning backlogs and get the skills in place that they need to respond to changes in the planning system. The Secretary of State announced 180 successful local authorities for year one in his planning speech on 19 December 2023. These local authorities have collectively been awarded £14.3 million from the £29 million fund and there will be a further round of allocations in Spring 2024.

The wider Planning Capacity and Capability programme is also providing c.£3 million in funding to bring in new talent to local planning authorities and bolster teams across England. This is being delivered through funding bursaries for those taking up planning as a career and a programme of graduate recruitment into local authorities working with Public Practice, the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) and the Local Government Association (LGA). Partner councils in the LGA Pathways to Planning programme include rural locations such as Wiltshire Council and North Lincolnshire Council.

We will continue to work with our stakeholders, including the Planning Advisory Service, to see what more can be done to support the rural economy.

In **Unleashing Rural Opportunity**, we announced our intention to remove any barriers to growth by streamlining and improving customer interactions with Defra's agencies and the services they offer. We are working to deliver a more streamlined service for users through an improvement plan for the Defra group's top 9 services by:

- reducing the number of paper forms people are required to complete
- making services joined-up, consistent, user-friendly, and accessible
- reducing manual processing to provide faster outcomes

As well as improving its online guidance, Defra is improving its helplines to make them more accessible, easier to understand, navigate, and quicker to get to the right person. We have already launched a more streamlined and improved caller experience for pet travel and plant imports and exports, three of the high-volume areas.



# Connectivity

## Digital connectivity

### Wireless Infrastructure Strategy

Improving rural connectivity is a top priority for the government. The **Wireless Infrastructure Strategy**, published by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) in April 2023, set out the government's plans to ensure that all parts of the UK have the wireless connectivity they need to unlock growth and prosperity. The strategy:

- set out new policies to drive adoption of 5G in key economic sectors, identifying agriculture as one of those sectors
- announced up to £40 million 5G Innovation Regions Programme to develop a framework to stimulate investment in and the adoption of 5G-enabled technologies and services
- established a Digital Infrastructure Advisory Group to bring together digital infrastructure leads across the UK, including in rural areas, to encourage investment and adoption at a local level
- confirmed the government's commitment to supporting 4G rollout through the Shared Rural Network, recognising its critical role in providing connectivity in rural areas
- published our 10-point plan for rural connectivity and the intention to appoint a Rural Connectivity Champion
- announced that the government would work with Ofcom to improve the accuracy of mobile coverage reporting

Since its publication, we have also announced:

- a nationwide campaign by the UK Telecoms Innovation Network to drive adoption of 5G, with a particular focus on agriculture
- the winning 5G Innovation Regions, awarding over £36 million across 10 regions, including rural areas, to drive the adoption of advanced wireless technologies

### Broadband

**Project Gigabit**, the Government's £5 billion programme to roll out gigabit capable broadband in hard-to-reach areas of the UK continues to make good progress. More than 80% of UK homes and businesses now have access to gigabit-capable broadband, up from just 6% in January 2019. The first premises have been connected under local and regional Project Gigabit contracts and all of the planned procurements in England have now been launched.

We are working to find new ways of connecting people and businesses in remote locations.

In June 2023 DSIT was awarded £7.3 million of funding for the **Rural Connectivity Accelerator** to help rural businesses to make the most of new technologies, enhance understanding of the connectivity needs of businesses in rural and ‘very hard to reach’ areas of the UK, and address deployment concerns. The project is in the discovery phase and is exploring the potential to launch up to 10 pilot projects in rural and remote areas.

On 2 October 2023, DSIT launched **a consultation with proposals how to improve broadband for Very Hard to Reach premises**, the approximately 100,000 premises in the UK where it may not be technically, financially or operationally viable to connect to gigabit capable services by commercial delivery or through Project Gigabit. The consultation closed on 27 November and the responses are now being considered.

On 2 October 2023, DSIT launched **a consultation** on a review of the Universal Service Obligation (USO). The USO provides a legal right to request a decent broadband connection of at least 10Mbps download and 1Mbps upload irrespective of geographic location, subject to meeting the necessary eligibility criteria. It is funded by industry and administered by Ofcom. The purpose of the review is to ensure that the USO provides an appropriate minimum service level, is effective in an increasingly diverse supplier market, and is transparent to consumers, businesses and interested stakeholders. The consultation closed on 27 November 2023 and the responses are being considered. A government response to this consultation will be published later this year.

### **Digital connectivity – mobile**

The **Shared Rural Network (SRN)** is a £1 billion government deal with the UK’s four mobile network operators to deliver 4G coverage to 95% of the UK landmass by the end of 2025. The programme is already delivering coverage improvements across the UK. 4G coverage now stands at 93%, which is up from 91% when the SRN agreement was signed in March 2020. In England, coverage from all four operators will rise to a minimum of 90%, up from 84%, and coverage from at least one operator will increase from 97% to 98%.

## **Transport**

We want rural communities to have access to transport that meets their needs. In October 2023, the Department for Transport published its guide **Future of Transport: Helping Local Authorities to unlock the benefits of technology and innovation in rural transport** as an aid to transport planning. Alongside this the Department for Transport has pledged up to £3 million of funding for rural transport innovation.

### **Buses**

We are taking action to support and improve bus services in rural areas.

In May 2023 we announced **£300 million funding to support local bus services until April 2025** through two new funding streams:

- £140 million directly as a grant to bus operators through the Bus Service Operator Grant Plus in the financial years 2023 to 2024 and 2024 to 2025

- £160 million to Local Transport Authorities through Phase 2 of the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding mechanism to maintain or enhance existing services or provide new ones

This is in addition to the over **£2 billion we are providing to help local authorities deliver better bus services for passengers** through their BSIPs. £1 billion of this was allocated in 2022 and is already benefiting passengers throughout England, including rural areas. On 4 October 2023, the Prime Minister then announced **new BSIP funding of over £1 billion for better buses across the North and Midlands**. The first £150 million of this was announced on 23 October 2023 with indicative allocations across the North and Midlands over the next year. Further allocations will be announced in due course.

On 4 October 2023 we also announced that the **£2 bus fare cap** first introduced on 1 January 2023 be extended until 31 December 2024. Over 150 bus operators have signed up to participate in this scheme. It should particularly benefit those living in rural areas where bus fares are often higher.

**Unleashing Rural Opportunity** restated our intention to consult on modernising the **Bus Service Operators Grant (BSOG)** to bus operators and local authorities. This grant helps them to keep fares lower and service levels higher than they would otherwise be. We are planning to consult on proposals to target support where it is most needed, including in rural areas. A further announcement will be made in due course.

All local transport authorities in England outside London have now published their **Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs)** and all have been allocated BSIP funding. BSIP funding is intended to be used by local transport authorities to support the aims of the National Bus Strategy to make buses more frequent, more reliable, easier to understand and use, better co-ordinated and cheaper. It can also be used to support and protect existing bus services that would otherwise be at risk. We expect local transport authorities to consider whether Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) could play a part in improving access to bus services in rural areas. DRT is a flexible service that provides shared transport to users who specify their desired location and time of pick-up and drop-off. DRT can complement fixed route public transport services and improve mobility in low-density areas and at low-demand times of day.

In the **National Bus Strategy**, we re-committed to supporting the introduction of at least 4,000 zero emission buses (ZEBs) and achieving a zero-emission fleet. and, so far, an estimated 4,200 ZEBs have been funded across the UK. Furthermore, in September 2023. We announced up to £129 million to support the introduction of hundreds more ZEBs and associated infrastructure in England (outside London) through the **Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas (ZEBRA) 2** programme with £25 million reserved for the introduction of ZEBs in rural areas.

## Roads

We recognise the continued importance of car and van use in rural areas and the importance of well-maintained highways. Well maintained roads are essential, connecting villages to local centres, supporting communities and reducing isolation.

- We announced **an additional £200 million in funding for highway maintenance** in the 2023 Budget. This is in addition to the funding settlement of £915 million per year for local highways maintenance (outside London and mayoral combined authorities) for the 3 financial years ending in March 2025.
- On 4 October 2023 we announced **£8.3 billion of funding for local roads resurfacing over a 11-year period** (financed by the £36 billion savings from not proceeding with HS2 Phase 2). This is on top of the current £5.5 billion allocated for the three 3 financial years ending in March.

We are considering how best to address the specific safety issues which may arise on the rural road network. We are already supporting local authorities to improve the safety of England's most high risk 'A roads', many of which are classified as rural, with £147.5 million of investment from the **Safer Roads Fund** to provide tailored safety interventions such as clearer signage, new surfacing, cycle lanes, better landscaping management or even full-scale junction redesigns. To date, the Safer Roads Fund has delivered improvements on 417.3 miles of rural roads at a cost of £86.14 million, 58.4% of the total fund. Overall, the Safer Roads Fund is expected to save 2,210 lives over the next 20 years.

### **Electric vehicles**

The Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV) is supporting Electric Vehicle (EV) uptake in rural areas through several schemes which provide grant funding for electric vehicle chargepoints. These schemes include:

- the **On-Street Residential ChargePoint Scheme** - which makes funding available to UK local authorities, including parish councils, to install public chargepoints for those without access to private parking. Applications for 2023 to 2024 funding close on 1 March 2024.
- the £381 million **Local EV Infrastructure Fund** – which supports local authorities in England to provide more public charging for drivers without off-street parking.
- **EV ChargePoint Grant Schemes** – which support residential and commercial landlords to provide chargepoints at rental and leasehold properties.
- the **Workplace Charging Scheme (WCS)** - which provides businesses, charities and the wider public sector with grants of up to £350 per socket to install up to 40 charging sockets for their employees and fleets. In order to accelerate uptake in rural areas, and support the tourist industry, the scheme has been widened to include small accommodation businesses and the charity sector, including many village halls. Under WCS, state-funded educational institutions, can apply for up to £2,500 per chargepoint. The scheme is available across the UK (excluding the Channel Islands and Isle of Man).
- **Plug in Vehicle Grants** – which support the uptake of zero emission vans, taxis and wheelchair accessible vehicles.

The Department of Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) and OZEV are working with Ofgem to ensure that charging a vehicle is completely integrated with our smart energy

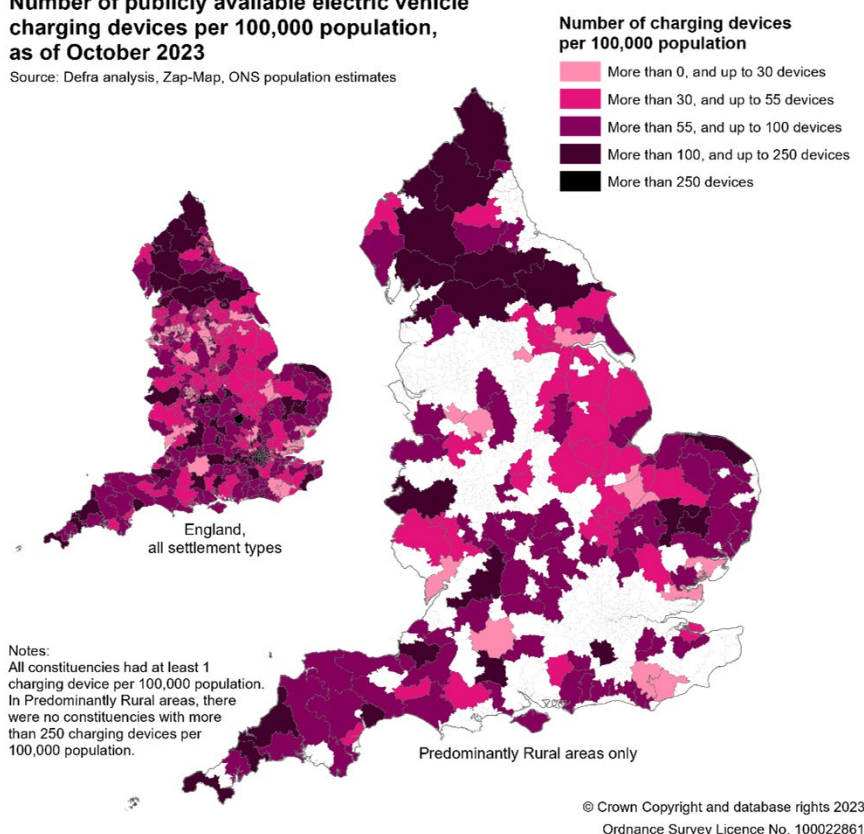
system. This will deliver benefits to the grid and lower cost electricity tariffs for those willing to charge flexibly.

To increase confidence in the charging network and reduce charging anxiety, the government has introduced regulations to improve the consumer experience across the public charging network. The regulations will ensure that pricing information and payment methods are simplified, chargepoints are reliable, and public chargepoint data is freely available.

**Figure 3: Number of publicly available electric vehicle charging devices per 100,000 population, as of October 2023**

**Number of publicly available electric vehicle charging devices per 100,000 population, as of October 2023**

Source: Defra analysis, Zap-Map, ONS population estimates



**Image description: a map of England showing the number of charging devices, from up to 30 devices per 100,000 to more than 250 devices per 100,000. Some rural areas have very few electric vehicle charging devices per population. All constituencies had at least 1 charging device per 100,000 population. In predominantly rural areas, there were no constituencies with more than 250 charging devices per 100,000 population.**

# Homes and energy

## Housing

**Rural communities need suitable local housing. It allows people to remain near work, family and friends, strengthens social networks, and ensures that local businesses have the locally based workforce they need. We have put a number of measures in place to support appropriate housing development on small sites in rural areas.**

In June, we announced new Defra funding for a network of Rural Housing Enablers across England to boost the delivery of more rural affordable housing. These are specialist, independent advisors who work with communities to develop affordable housing schemes and up to £2.5 million per annum will be available to 31 March 2025.

Our revised National Planning Policy Framework (published December 2023) included amendments to emphasise the importance of **community-led housing development** in rural areas. We also introduced a new **exception site policy** to make it easier for community groups to develop affordable housing on sites that would not otherwise be suitable as rural exception sites. More generally, we intend to undertake further consultation on specific proposals to **strengthen the existing small sites policy in the NPPF** in due course. The new Defra funding for **Rural Housing Enablers** will help to deliver more Rural Exception Sites.

In **Unleashing Rural Opportunity**, we announced a review of the **permitted development right to convert agricultural buildings into homes**. We subsequently consulted on a package of proposals, including some aimed at simplifying the rules to encourage the delivery of more, smaller homes. The consultation closed on 25 September 2023. An announcement will be made in due course.

**Unleashing Rural Opportunity** reaffirmed our ambition to deliver as much affordable rural housing as possible through the Affordable Homes Programme. In October 2023, Homes England published its **Rural Housing Statement** setting out how the agency is working to enable the delivery of good quality, affordable rural homes.

Large numbers of **short term lets** can impact on some rural communities. We announced on 19 February that we will introduce planning measures to give local areas more control over future growth in the number of short term lets. We will introduce a new planning use class for short term lets and associated permitted development rights. These measures will enable local areas to strike the right balance between protecting local communities and the local economy.

Recognising the need to manage the impact of second homes in some communities, the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act includes **new powers to enable councils to apply a premium of up to 100% extra on the council tax bills of second homes**. It will be for councils to decide whether to apply a premium in their area and if so, how much. The additional funding from any premium charged can be used by councils will to address the

impact of second homes on local communities. These changes could come into effect from April 2025.

## Energy

### Energy network infrastructure

As we increase the development of low-carbon and renewable electricity generation within the UK, we will also need to increase the scale and pace of development of the electricity transmission network. The electricity transmission network is required to move electricity from where it is generated to where it is needed, and it will not be possible to deliver a secure energy supply, which is vital to growth and prosperity, without developing the electricity transmission network to support it. This means in Great Britain, around four times as much new transmission network will be needed in the next seven years as was built since 1990. We published the Transmission Acceleration Action Plan in November 2023, setting out actions to accelerate construction of electricity transmission network infrastructure in response to the Electricity Networks Commissioner's report published in August 2023.

The government wants to ensure communities living near new transmission network infrastructure can benefit from supporting the delivery of cheaper, more secure and low-carbon energy for all of Great Britain. The government has consulted on proposals for community benefits for transmission network infrastructure and in the government response published in November 2023, we confirmed our position to offer electricity bill discounts for properties closest to transmission network infrastructure. This could be up to £1,000 per year, or £80 a month, over 10 years for properties.

Our community benefits proposals would also see wider benefits to support local projects of around £200,000 per km for overhead lines, £40,000 per km for underground cables, and £200,000 per substation. Government will publish guidance this year to support communities in deciding how this is spent, for example, installing electric vehicle charge points, local energy efficiency measures or local energy generation.

In November 2023 we also published a joint **Connections Action Plan** with Ofgem to accelerate network connections. For customers in rural areas, this should result in easier and quicker connections to the network from upgrading domestic connections to accommodate a heat pump through to installing rooftop solar on farm buildings and connecting solar farms.

Ofgem, has recognised that **connection costs** can act as a barrier to installing low carbon technologies particularly in rural areas where factors such as distance from substations and available network capacity can make connections more expensive. In order to make it cheaper for customers to connect to the distribution network, Ofgem has decided to remove (for demand customers) or reduce (for generation customers) the charge for any distribution network reinforcement costs for connection applications submitted after 1 April 2023.

## Energy support for households and businesses

We are continuing to encourage households to improve the energy efficiency of their homes where they can, spending £6 billion this Parliament and a further £6 billion to 2028 on making buildings cleaner and warmer. That is in addition to the £5 billion that will be delivered through the **Energy Company Obligation (ECO4)** and the Great British Insulation Scheme up to March 2026. Last winter, we supported households with up to half their energy costs and we continue to support the most vulnerable through the Warm Home Discount, which is £150 paid to 3 million households.



**Decarbonising rural homes.** The Prime Minister's speech on 20 September 2023 set out that we must reach Net Zero through pragmatic and proportionate action. We have therefore postponed the date for phasing out fossil fuel heating installations in off gas grid homes to 2035 to give households and suppliers time to prepare and will set an exemption for the around 20% of off-grid homes that are not suitable for heat pumps. We will work with industry to develop detailed guidance on how households, businesses, and installers should determine whether their property is suitable for a heat pump and will consult later this year on alternative clean heating solutions for off-grid homes that are not suitable for a heat pump.

The **Domestic Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards** require privately rented homes in England and Wales to meet the minimum standard of Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) Band E before they can be let, unless a valid exemption applies. The Prime Minister announced in his speech on 20 September 2023 that the government will not be requiring landlords to improve the energy efficiency of their property to higher standards than those currently required by legislation.



The **Home Upgrade Grant** (HUG) provides grants for energy efficiency and clean heating upgrades for low-income households at risk of fuel poverty who are living off the gas grid in England. These households, many of which are in rural areas, heat their homes with expensive direct electric heating or with the most polluting fuels such as oil, coal and liquid petroleum gas. The HUG grants help them to reduce their energy bills and transition to clean heat. Under the first phase of HUG, which was allocated £218 million to be delivered from January 2022 to March 2023, 64% of measures installed by the scheme have been delivered by Local Authorities classified as rural. The second phase of HUG which runs from April 2023 to March 2025 has allocated up to £378 million in grants ringfenced for rural local authorities out of a total of £630 million.

The **Boiler Upgrade Scheme** provides grants towards the upfront cost of installing low carbon heating technologies. The scheme has a budget of £450 million from 2022 to 2025 and we are extending it to 2028. To date, 57% of grants have been for installations in rural properties. On 23 October 2023, the grant towards the cost of an air source or ground source heat pump increased to £7,500, making the scheme one of the most generous of its kind in Europe.

The **Energy Company Obligation** scheme, ECO4, is designed to tackle fuel poverty and reduce carbon emissions by improving energy efficiency scheme for low-income and vulnerable households. Under ECO4 rural homes can receive support for insulation and for certain types of low carbon heating. This scheme runs until March 2026.

The **Great British Insulation Scheme** provides support for predominantly single insulation measures to households which would not otherwise qualify for energy efficiency support. In England, the scheme is open to households with an EPC rating of D to G in the lower council tax bands A to D, as well as ringfenced support for low-income households.

# Communities

## Health

Access to good quality health and social care is important for everyone. There can be additional challenges in accessing and delivering health and social care services in rural areas and we will continue to work to address these to provide better and more accessible care in rural areas. **Unleashing Rural Opportunity** set out how we are addressing the challenges of primary care provision, including those in rural areas, through our **Delivery Plan for Recovering Access to Primary Care, Targeted Enhanced Recruitment Scheme for GP trainees** and **Faster, Simpler and Fairer: our plan to recover and reform NHS dentistry** which was published on the 7<sup>th</sup> February.

The **NHS Long Term Workforce Plan** was published in June 2023. The plan sets out what the NHS and its partners need to do to deliver an NHS workforce which will meet the changing needs of the population over the next 15 years and be sustainable over the long term. We are backing the plan with over £2.4 billion over 5 years to fund additional education and training places for healthcare professionals. This is on top of increases to education and training investment. We will ensure that this expansion reflects local NHS workforce needs, with an emphasis on priority geographical areas, including rural and coastal areas.

The plan sets an ambition to double the number of medical school places. Five new medical schools have already opened in historically hard-to-recruit rural and coastal locations in Tyne and Wear, West Lancashire, Essex, Lincolnshire and Kent. As doctors are more likely to settle and practice in the areas where they train, medical school expansion into rural areas will increase rural experience in medical degrees and help to better address the health needs of these areas.

Following an announcement in the [Delivery Plan for Recovering Access to Primary Care](#), we introduced a new **Pharmacy First** service which enables community pharmacists to treat seven common conditions without the need for patients to see a GP. We have also provided additional funding to expand of the existing Blood Pressure Checks and Pharmacy Contraception Services. These new and expanded services will increase access to NHS care and convenience for millions of patients.

We have made progress in addressing the mental health needs of rural communities. The recent report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Committee on Rural Mental Health highlighted the need for greater collaboration between government departments and with agencies and charities. We are already taking, or plan to take, action on many of the report's recommendations, including through the NHS Long Term Plan which increases investment in mental health care by at least £2.3 billion a year by 2023 to 2024.

Additionally, we know that there are risk factors linked to suicide, many of which affect people living in rural areas. In September 2023, we published the Suicide Prevention Strategy for England, which sets out our ambitions over the next 5 years to reduce suicide

rates, improve support for people who have self-harmed, and improve support for people bereaved by suicide.

We recognise that the Agricultural Transition will create challenges for some farming businesses. To support these changes and to give farmers the best chance of benefiting from our reforms we are providing support to build resilience during the early years of the transition through the Future Farming Resilience Fund.

The FFRF is designed to provide free business support to farmers and land managers in England during the early years of the agricultural transition. It does this by awarding grants to organisations who help farmers and land managers to:

- understand the changes that are happening
- identify how, what and when they may need to adapt their business models
- access tailored support to adapt

The National Planning Policy Framework (2023) expects local planning authorities to assess the size, type and tenure of housing needed for different groups in the community, including older people and people with disabilities, and to reflect this in their Local Plans. The revised framework states that, when planning for housing older people, particular regard should be given to retirement housing, housing-with-care, and care homes, to support our ageing population.

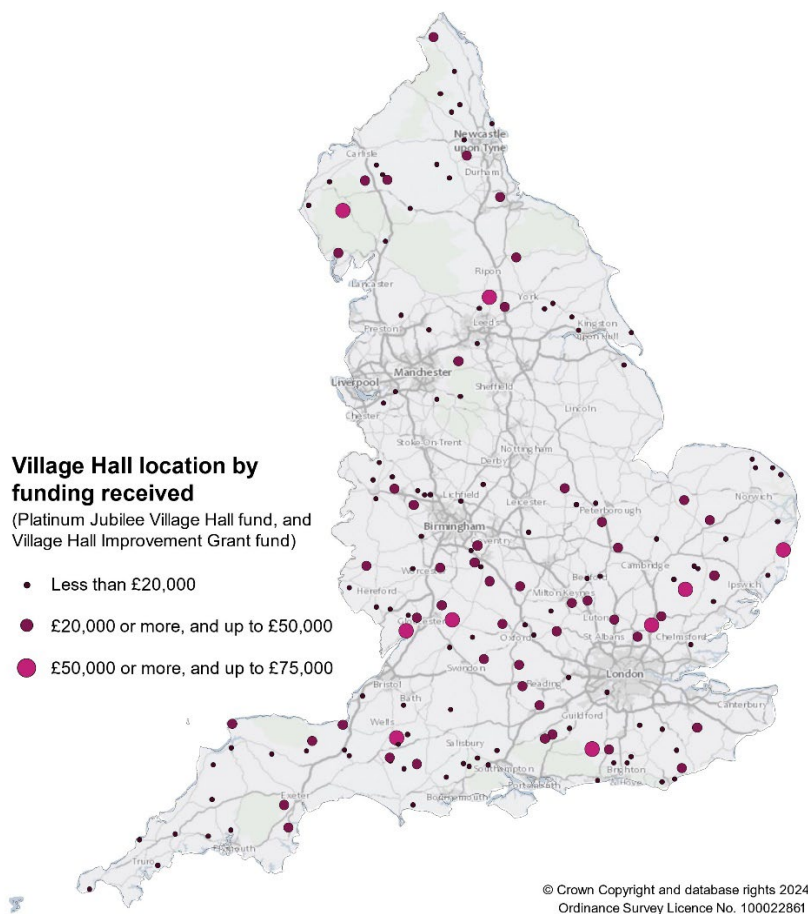
## Thriving communities

The government recognises the importance of services to ensure rural communities can flourish. The **Rural Services Delivery Grant**, purposed with providing funding in recognition of the possible additional costs of delivering services in sparsely populated areas will increase to £110 million from 2024 to 2025, up from £95 million previously. This is the largest cash increase in the grant since 2018 to 2019, and the second successive year of above-inflation.

The £3 million **Platinum Jubilee Village Halls Fund** provides grants for the modernisation and improvement of village halls, helping to ensure that these important community assets remain viable. In February 2024, we launched a smaller fund, offering grants from £2,000 to £5,000, fulfilling our commitment in **Unleashing Rural Opportunity** to make the Fund accessible to smaller scale projects.

Defra provides support for local community activities in rural areas, through a grant to **Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE)** and its network of member organisations across England. In 2023 to 2024, a grant of £1.7 million was provided to support community-based action delivering the following priorities at local level: digital connectivity, skills and inclusion; rural life opportunities; social support; rural transport, net zero and affordable energy; housing and planning and business support and social enterprise development.

**Figure 4: Village Hall location by funding received**



**Image description: a map of England showing where Platinum Jubilee Village Hall and Village Hall Improvement Grant funding was awarded to rural areas. The amount of funding received ranged from less than £20,000 to more than £75,000. The only Village Hall which received more than £75,000 was in Caryford, Somerset. This is also the only hall to receive funding from both grants.**

We are also supporting community ownership of vital rural assets such as pubs and shops through the £150 million **Community Ownership Fund**. To date, £71.4 million has been allocated to 257 projects across the UK, including many in rural areas. We have changed the rules of the Fund in order to make it more accessible and help to save as many treasured community assets at risk of loss as possible. We have increased the cap for capital funding on all asset types from £1 million to £2 million; reduced the match funding requirement for all bids from 50% to 20% (10% in exceptional circumstances) and allowed applications from Parish, town and community councils.

Cash also continues to be used by millions of people and it is important to ensure that those living and running businesses in rural areas are able to access and deposit cash. Last year, the government legislated through the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 to protect access to cash by providing the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) with responsibility and powers to seek to ensure reasonable provision of cash deposit and

withdrawal services. The government's subsequent **Cash Access Policy Statement** (18 August 2023), which the FCA must take into account in exercising its powers, provides that the vast majority of people and businesses in predominantly rural areas should have access to cash deposit and withdrawal services within 3 miles. The FCA recently concluded a consultation on its proposed regulatory regime for access to cash and expects to finalise its rules in Q3 2024.

## Education

We are levelling up school funding and delivering resources where they are needed most. The **National Funding Formula** (NFF) distributes funding based on schools' and pupils' needs and characteristics. In particular it recognises that some schools are necessarily small because they are remote and do not have the same opportunities to grow or make efficiency savings as other schools, and that such schools often play a significant role in the rural communities they serve. The NFF therefore includes an element of funding specifically for schools in sparsely populated locations. We have changed how we fund sparsity, including a more accurate measure of schools' remoteness by road distances. As a result, the total amount allocated for sparsity has increased from £26 million in the financial year 2020 to 2021 to £98 million in 2024 to 2025. Eligible primary schools can be awarded up to £57,100 in sparsity funding in 2024 to 2025 and all other schools up to £83,000.

We remain committed to **supporting rural schools** and expect decision makers to adopt a presumption against their closure. The presumption does not mean that these schools will never close, but it does mean that the case for closure should be strong, in the best interests of local educational provision, and that alternative measures to closure have been considered. Rural maintained primary schools have additional protection through the Rural Designation Order, which requires certain bodies to be consulted prior to a decision on closure. A list of these schools is published annually.



## Rural crime

In January 2023 the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) established a new **National Rural Crime Unit** to support police forces nationally in responding to rural crime. As noted in **Unleashing Rural Opportunity**, the Home Office has provided one-off funding of £200,000 to the NRCU. This will support activities to deliver the NRCU's strategic priorities of tackling equipment theft and bringing together every rural police force in across England and Wales in Partnerships Against Rural Crime. In addition, Defra have awarded the NRCU a grant of £100,000 to fund a dedicated 12 months' post which started in February 2024, to explore how the police's role in tackling fly-tipping can be optimised, with a focus on rural areas. Outputs will include training for police officers and work on intelligence sharing across borders and between authorities.

In September 2022, the National Police Chiefs' Council published its **rural and wildlife crime strategy** 2022 to 2025. For the first time, this strategy includes both rural and wildlife crime priorities. The strategy provides a framework through which policing and its partners can work together to tackle the most prevalent threats and emerging issues which predominantly affect rural communities.

Core funding of the National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) is principally provided by the government (Defra and the Home Office). The NWCU provides intelligence, analysis and investigative assistance to police forces and other law enforcement agencies across the UK to support them in investigating wildlife crime. In 2022 Defra more than doubled its funding of the Unit to target wildlife crime priorities from a total of £495,000 over the three previous years to £1.2 million for the three-year period of 2022 to 2025.

The government recognises the damage to businesses, communities and the environment caused by **fly tipping**. As set out in the Prime Minister's [Antisocial Behaviour \(ASB\) Action Plan](#), published in March 2023, Defra is supporting and encouraging councils to take tougher action to deter people from fly-tipping and to punish those who do.

In July 2023, we increased the upper limit on the fixed penalties that councils can issue for fly-tipping to £1,000, up from £400. We also increased the upper limits on the penalties for littering to £500, from £150; and for householders who give their waste to a fly-tipper to £600 from £400. We understand some councils are already setting higher levels, and we will continue to monitor this.

We have also increased scrutiny on how councils are using their powers through publication of our first fly-tipping enforcement league tables in August 2023. These tables have now been incorporated into our annual fly-tipping statistics release, with the most recent publication in January 2024.

We also laid regulations in January 2024 to ringfence the use of income from litter and fly-tipping penalties, which councils keep for enforcement and clean up only. The regulations are due to come into force on 1 April 2024. To help ensure that fixed penalty notice powers are used proportionately for littering, we will also bring forward statutory enforcement guidance for littering.

We are funding councils across the country to directly intervene at fly-tipping hotspots, including rural areas. Across two rounds of our fly-tipping grant scheme, we have now awarded nearly £1.2 million to help more than 30 councils. Many councils are installing CCTV, with others using the funds for physical barriers such as fencing, with strong results being seen. For example, Herefordshire Council have seen a reduction in fly-tipping of over 90% across areas where CCTV and signage have been installed, as well as stronger relationships with local farmers and landowners. Case studies are being published so that others can learn about those interventions which were most successful. We have pledged a further £1 million to be awarded this spring, helping even more councils.

We work with stakeholders, such as the National Farmers Union and the Country Land and Business Association, through the National Fly-tipping Prevention Group, to promote and disseminate good practice, including how to prevent fly-tipping on private land. Chaired by Defra, the group is delivering a 'fly-tipping toolkit' to help landowners, councils and businesses tackle common issues such as preparing robust cases for court, setting up effective local fly-tipping partnerships, and raising awareness of the waste duty of care for businesses and householders.

On wider **waste crime**, our plans for reform of waste permit exemptions and how waste carriers are regulated will remove opportunities for criminals to abuse the system and will chase out rogue operators, including fly-tippers, from the sector. The introduction of digital waste tracking will reduce the ability for waste criminals to hide evidence of the mishandling of waste and make it easier for authorities to identify waste dropping out of the system, which might indicate illegal activity such as fly-tipping.

The Joint Unit for Waste Crime (JUWC) was launched in 2020. It brings together the Environment Agency, HMRC, National Crime Agency, the police, waste regulators from across the UK and other operational partners to share intelligence and tasking to disrupt and prevent serious organised waste crime. In the 3 years since the JUWC launched it has worked with 131 partner organisations and engaged in 253 multi-agency days of action, which have resulted in 180 associated arrests by other agencies.

The government fully understands the devastating impact that livestock worrying can have on animals and farmers, including the financial implications. In **Unleashing Rural Opportunity**, we announced that we would move ahead to tackle livestock worrying by legislating to improve police powers to respond to incidents. In preparation, we have consulted key stakeholder groups including representatives from the police, farming and livestock associations, veterinary bodies and dog welfare groups.

A Private Members' Bill was introduced in the House of Commons by Thérèse Coffey MP to tackle the issue of livestock worrying. Government confirmed our support at Second Reading in February 2024. The bill contains important measures to improve police powers which build on the work this government is doing to enhance our existing world-leading animal welfare standards.

The **theft of high value agricultural equipment** is a real concern for rural communities. This year, we supported the passage of the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023. This

legislation will help to prevent the theft of items such as quad bikes by requiring that new equipment has forensic markings and is fitted with immobilisers before it can be sold. It also requires the sold equipment to be registered on a database. There have been calls for the scope of the Act to be extended to cover larger agricultural machinery and equipment, and for a similar requirement for forensic marking of hand-held power tools to prevent theft and re-sale. The Home Office has conducted a call for evidence to seek views on extending the scope of the Act, further discussions have taken place with industry and stakeholders and the government's response will be published in due course.



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We work closely with our 33 agencies and arm's length bodies on our ambition to make our air purer, our water cleaner, our land greener and our food more sustainable. Our mission is to restore and enhance the environment for the next generation, and to leave the environment in a better state than we found it.



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