



# Future Countryside: Event Digest

October 2023



# Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	4
Public Opinion on the British Countryside	6
Event Summary	8

# Acknowledgements



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Thanks are due in particular to;

## **Future Countryside, Co-Chairs**

Julian Glover – Chair, Landscapes Review

Nick Herbert – Chair, Countryside Alliance

## **The Future Countryside Steering Group**

Julia Aglionby – Chair, Uplands Alliance

James Bethell – House of Lords

Elizabeth Buchanan – Non-Executive Director, NFU Mutual

Nick Butler – Fabian Society

Ewen Cameron – Chair, Land Use Committee, House of Lords

Jake Fiennes – Director of Conservation, Holkham Estate

Robert Gascoyne-Cecil – Hatfield House

Sarah Mukherjee – CEO, Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment

Nicholas Soames – House of Lords

Kathy Willis – Professor of Biodiversity, University of Oxford & House of Lords

## **Event Rapporteur**

Heather Hancock – Chair of The Royal Countryside Fund

## **Session chairs**

Sarah Mukherjee – CEO, Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment

Julia Aglionby – Chair, Uplands Alliance

Fiona Reynolds – Chair, National Audit Office

## **Keynote speakers**

Rory Stewart – President, Give Directly

Henry Dimbleby – Co-Founder of Leon, Author of the National Food Strategy

Jonty Brunyee – Head of Sustainable Farming and Food Systems at FarmED

Thérèse Coffey – Secretary of State, DEFRA

Peter Mandelson – House of Lords

Daniel Zeichner – Shadow Environment Minister

## **Event team**

Emily Norton – Event Co-director

Georgia Berry – Event Co-director

Ali Robinson – Event Administrator

Sarah Lee – Event Coordinator, The Countryside Alliance Foundation

## **Our partners and sponsors**

Hatfield House

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The Farming Community Network





# Introduction

This report is a digest of dialogue from the Future Countryside event that took place on 6th June 2023 at Hatfield House.

Future Countryside brought together over 200 rural voices with diverse views but one shared ambition – to ensure the countryside plays a positive part in the lives of the British people. The aim of the event was to create the space for debate, to develop a shared vision for a modern countryside.

A vision that focuses on the opportunities this extraordinary resource can provide to restore human health, drive nature recovery, help address climate change and energy security, and of course to grow nutrient rich food.

The initial objective, to create a forum for those who care about rural Britain to share views and connect with decision-makers, was met. The individuals and organisations represented at Future Countryside – as hosts, partners, speakers, and delegates – demonstrated a shared passion for, and commitment to, a vibrant future for rural communities and landscapes.

Clearly apparent was the range of views, interests, priorities, and inevitable tensions that arise when looking at something as multifaceted as ‘the countryside’. The range of demands placed on our rural places is varied and changing, and the issues facing people who manage the land, who live and work within it are equally as complex.

There were challenges apparent in defining a shared vision and how to deliver it, but there were clear areas of consensus. There was a palpable sense of urgency from many in the room – articulating the imperative to global issues such as climate change, public health and nature recovery, and the potential of the countryside to play a greater and more focused role in response.

Given the myriad of roles our rural places play, it was clear we need a shift from a focus on single issues to one based on shared objectives and multiple outcomes. Perhaps there is a need to abandon a pursuit of ‘balance’ in favour of clear priorities if we are to optimise the contribution the countryside can make to so many areas of our collective future.

As was pointed out more than once on the day, we know what to do. We have the evidence that tells us by how much nature has been denigrated and why and how we should restore it; the role land, soil, trees and hedgerows can play in addressing climate change is undeniable. The positive impacts on health and wellbeing from time spent in nature, and from eating food produced from healthy soils, is understood.

With recognition of what the countryside can offer, there was a clear call for rural communities to be at the heart of decision making and delivery. To ensure that, whilst optimising what the countryside can deliver, those who live and work within it to deliver those benefits can thrive.

The systemic issues that undermine the vitality of rural communities are well understood. Restrictive planning controls and examples of unsympathetic development, divergence in economic and planning policy, lack of long-term and secure funding, rural concerns as an 'add on' to central policy making rather than drivers of decision making. Limited access to affordable housing, to services, transport, and employment opportunities lead to many, often reluctantly, turning their back on rural life resulting in a 'missing generation' across much of our countryside.



What is lacking are easy or universally adoptable solutions. That does not mean solutions don't or can't exist. In the coming weeks, Event Rapporteur Heather Hancock will be responding to this challenge. Heather's report will set out the principles needed to shape a vision for a vibrant countryside that can help us meet the significant and complex challenges we face. A vision the country can understand and embrace, which can be effectively and consistently achieved, and which empowers communities, rural and

urban, to work together to care for and invest in our countryside. A countryside shared, enjoyed, and benefitted by all.

Heather's report will be published in the autumn, with Future Countryside delegates being the first to see this call to action.

In the interim, this digest of the Future Countryside event records the important contributions made on the day. We hope it will be a useful reference point in the coming months and years.



**Future Countryside brought together over 200 rural voices with diverse views but one shared ambition – to ensure the countryside plays a positive part in the lives of the British people.**



# Public Opinion on the British Countryside

## Research summary

In advance of the conference, Future Countryside undertook some important research to understand the public perception of rural Britain – both from those who live there, and those who don't. The research, carried out by ORB International revealed some interesting perspectives.

**Britons are highly proud of the countryside, citing that it improves mental and physical health... ..but some feel that a lack of transport links and high transport costs are a barrier to making it accessible for all.**

**Rural and urban populations are largely aligned on the major issues facing the countryside, particularly on development. Again, both are aligned on agreeing that young people should be educated on the countryside, especially farming.**

**The rural population feel that their voice is lacking and that political decisions are urban or London-centric. Strong representation for the needs of rural communities is essential to tackling challenges in the countryside.**

**Almost all feel that it is important to protect the countryside but are pessimistic that the leading political parties will do so. Controlling development, supporting farmers, and education are perceived as the best ways to protect it.**



The polling revealed that British people are incredibly proud of our countryside (second only to our NHS) with almost everyone (93%) agreeing that it should be regarded as part of our national heritage. A majority of people (54%) don't feel the countryside is being taken seriously enough by the Government, and three-quarters (75%) want more political debate on the challenges facing rural areas.

The research also highlighted how the countryside is cherished by the whole population, with three in five (59%) saying that protecting the countryside is "very important". Four times more people (36%) think those who live and work there are better placed to run the countryside than politicians (8%). People also reported an urban/ rural divide, but one which relates to how we feel rather than any conflict between town and country. The countryside makes us feel relaxed (89%), happy (68%) and hopeful (35%), whilst our towns and cities make us feel anxious (39%) and indifferent (32%).

You can read the full polling results [here](#) or you can see the presentation [here](#).

Responding to the research, Nick Herbert, co-founder of Future Countryside and Chairman of the Countryside Alliance, said: *"The public clearly treasure the countryside yet they also believe that politicians don't take it seriously enough. These findings should be a wake-up call to our political leaders who need to pay far more attention to what people feel is part of our national heritage. This is exactly why the Future Countryside initiative is timely and important."*

Julian Glover, Chair of the Government's Landscapes Review and co-founder of Future Countryside, said: *"Today's event will tackle some of the key problems facing the countryside but will also start to address how we can make the countryside not just survive but also thrive. The British countryside should be treated as nationally important by the Government, but there is a lot to do and the choices we make now will shape our country, and its health, for centuries to come."*



## Event Summary

### Opening section

#### Julian Glover Co-Chair

- Welcome this opportunity for debate.
- We are asking the important question of what the countryside can do for everyone.
- This must be a conversation with people at the centre.





## Nick Herbert Co-Chair

- Research commissioned by the Countryside Alliance Foundation to understand people's feelings about the countryside showed that British people are incredibly proud of our countryside, second only to our NHS, with almost everyone polled (93%) agreeing that it should be regarded as part of our national heritage.
- Most people (54%) don't feel the countryside is being taken seriously enough by the Government, and three-quarters (75%) want more political debate on the challenges facing rural areas.
- The threats to the countryside outlined by those spoken to include:
  - Overuse of chemicals, and associated pollution.
  - Housing development without necessary infrastructure.
  - Lack of public transport.
  - Lack of access to services.
  - Lack of or problems accessing work.
  - Lack of activities, opportunities, and engagement for young people.
  - Importance of protecting the "country" way of life which includes the farming tradition.
  - Decline of farming and fair rewards for farmers for the work they do.
  - Lack of understanding by urban people of the country way of life.
  - Perception of countryside for older people.
  - Urban population view that the country is 'just for old people'.
- What is clear is that the countryside is not taken seriously enough by Government and more political debate is needed on challenges facing rural areas.





### Heather Hancock, Chair of The Royal Countryside Fund Event Rapporteur

- Rural communities are struggling to have their voices heard and feel as though they are being left behind as communities are becoming hollowed out, with fewer services and fewer family farms.
- They are facing enormous pressure from the pace and scale of economic and societal change, especially small and fragile communities.
- Need to keep in mind that rural communities' skills, understanding, and knowledge are vital for keeping the countryside in the way that urban people like to find it, and to allow it to make the biggest contribution it can to some of our biggest challenges.
- Rural life can be hard due to hardship and lack of money and there is an exodus of talent leaving rural communities.
- But by the same token, there is a positive and forward-thinking mindset for a healthier, happier, greener, and more prosperous countryside.
- Needs innovation and initiative and there is a lot of great individual work being done.
- We must think about those who live urban, rural, and blended lives.
- We have heard that the countryside is this nation's second greatest asset, and we need to heal the wounds inflicted on nature and the environment.
- The critical focus for today is not on what is wrong, but on where we go from here.
- Setting a vision is the easy bit.
- We need to focus on the How, Who and What of positive action.
- What has stopped brilliant ideas succeeding or scaling?
- How do rural communities get around the obstacles?
- Acknowledge the symptom, identify the cause, and find the remedy.
- Who has the authority, skills, were-with-all to act? Who do rural communities trust to act on their behalf?
- Who can negotiate compromises to show the rest of Britain that this is the future that can be aspired to. That with the right support and engagement everyone has a stake in its success.
- We are starting from a strong base as there seems to be optimism, hope and determination.

“

**Rural communities’ skills, understanding, and knowledge are vital for keeping the countryside in the way that urban people like to find it, and to allow it to make the biggest contribution.**





## Keynote Speech

**Rory Stewart**  
President, Give Directly

### **Our Countryside - why it is important and how to make it better**

- The countryside faces a problem between perception and reality.
- Sense of lurching between extreme positiveness and extreme negativity; hope and despair.
- For example, there is currently a sense of troubling despair in regard to water, beaches and the air being filthy, but in reality, the water has never been cleaner, but the perception is that it's filthy.
- There is a lot of tension in the room with profound disagreements amongst the people here but uncovering this is the only way we will move forward.
- We need to bring disagreements into the light to understand them.
- Moment of pretension – refer to Aristotle.
  - Logos – rational reasoning.
  - Pathos – emotion.
  - Ethos – moral character.
- Logos - need for honesty around contradictions that exist.
- We exist in a world of contradictions and limited resources, often needing to choose lesser evils.



- Pretending that everyone can have what they want is not helpful.
- Priorities and tensions lead to holistic outcomes.
- Exercise in patience, compromise, and defeat.
- Pathos - can't get stuck in the cost benefit analysis.
- Have to engage the public.
- Asking people to sacrifice real things, takes time and reasoning as well as passion and emotion.
- Communicate with emotion and humour.
- Be unashamed in your emotional appeal for the countryside.
- Ethos - the ethos and ethics of the countryside are complex in every dimension, balancing the past and the future is complicated.
- It cannot be a utilitarian economic calculation.
- How do we resolve tensions between local, national, and global.
- Need to navigate a deep attachment to nature – relationships between humans and the natural world.
- Story of paradox. There are real tensions between environment and food production both locally and globally.

## Session 1:

# A Healthy Countryside

Chaired by Sarah Mukherjee  
CEO, Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment

## How do we make the countryside a bigger & better contributor to the nation's health & happiness?

Opening address

Henry Dimbleby  
Co-Founder of Leon, Author of the National Food Strategy  
and of Ravenous

### Making the most of our land

- Until the 18th century, land was used to produce everything we needed; food, warmth & building materials. 94% of land was countryside.
- Once fossil fuels were found, then land was used primarily for food and leisure.
- There is a real need to use land again for multiple functions.
- Holocene – “Age of Man” – for the last 10,000+ years, land was used to grow food, construction, warmth & materials.





- By the late 1940's, the question was asked, "how do we feed the world?", as populations were growing.
- There are now nearly 8 billion people in the world, how will we feed them in the future?
- Created a farming system on 70% of land which completely dominates the environment and is partly responsible for causing damage to the natural world.
- There is a large amount of low yielding land which needs to be farmed in a different way - 20% of land yields 4% of calories, which is suited to be farmed in a nature friendly way, whilst restoring carbon. Restore nature, reduce farmed output, sequester carbon, improve water and add value to tourism. Positive trade offs.
- Green revolution - exponential food production capacity, which can create twice the number of calories for 8 billion people from half the land.
- The land should be farmed more regeneratively, with higher outputs but lower inputs to increase tourism and improve the quality of water and to be farmed in a nature friendly way to restore carbon. Trade off will be needed.
- 85% of farmland is used to feed animals – shift away from meat production and consumption.
- Presently, we can't know what will work and we need to be able to trial and learn, for example, upland payments.
- Everyone agrees that nature is denuded and with a finite amount of land, needs recovery and carbon sequestration, and to reinvigorate local economies.
- The vision. What would land look like? Currently, we don't know what the effects of the policies put in place will be. Will it have the impact we want? Nature doesn't always respond so as yet we don't know.
- Seems complicated and requires enormous political skill. All doing what is 'right', but erring towards the right which is slightly in their favour.
- We need to be honest in exploring differences and be ready to give a little and take a little.

## From the floor

### Kathy Willis University of Oxford – Professor of Biodiversity House of Lords

- 89% of deaths are from non-communicable diseases.
- Interaction with nature is imperative for good health, however not all countryside is equal.
- Walking in certain types of landscapes; a natural mosaic with a mixture of trees and hedges, with different sounds, sights, and smells, has been shown to lower blood pressure and make us more resilient to disease.
- It has also been shown that when we walk in mosaic landscapes, we take environmental microbiomes into our gut – but we only get this from a biodiverse landscape.
- Biodiverse landscapes need to be nearer to cities and be accessible enough to have a major impact on people.
- Look to the countryside and find the right type of nature in the right space with accessibility and the right to roam.
- Determine where we allow people to roam and what type of landscapes are needed?



### Anne McIntosh House of Lords

- How do we enhance the power of the hills for health and happiness?
- The hills perhaps hold the solution for health and happiness.

### Vicky Hird Sustain

- Ultra processed food and junk food - we need to change and break the cycle. How do we do this? Look at who is buying commodities/produce from the land?
- We need to blur the divide between urban and peri urban.
- More market gardens are needed so people can see where their food is coming from. These gardens will provide jobs and the opportunity to engage with farmers. Push for a market garden renaissance.



## Tracy Bleakley Norfolk and Waveney NHS

- There is a discrepancy of health outcomes for the rural community - outcomes are much lower than urban communities.
- Health issues such as mental, physical, and dental are a problem as the rural community don't have access to these services.
- Easy to focus on getting people out of cities but we need to address rural health inequalities as well.
- We need to see more social prescribing.
- People living in rural as well as urban areas need the opportunity to live an affordable life, earn a living free from anxiety, managing their mental health to preventing physical health decline.

## Maxwell Ayamba Sheffield Environmental Movement

- We need a natural health service that recognises the health-giving properties of the countryside - but access is not diverse enough.
- Brought up to understand the frameworks of environmental discourse and that the countryside in the UK is a place of white privilege. There is a need for this to be deconstructed and decolonised.
- Farming is the least diverse sector, with the government being second.
- We are all part of the ecosystem; nature does not recognise class, gender or colour which leads to deeper thinking about ethics, inclusion and how people are marginalised and why we need to make countryside space more equitable.



## Richard Benyon Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

- Dasgupta biodiversity report was commissioned by the Treasury as an empirical assessment of the value of nature.
- It presented evidence that loss of biodiversity is a catastrophe for both the environment and the economy and recognises the health-giving power of access to the countryside.

### Richard Benyon cont.

- Ongoing access argument which is not solely between those who want the right to roam and angry farmers – the answer is actually in the middle and about providing more people with access locally.
- Social prescribing is diverting people from the NHS due to the health-giving power of the countryside & landscapes.
- Government – want to know more ideas on ‘middle ground’ solutions.
- No one should live more than 15 minutes from a ‘proper’ green space – importance of peri-urban spaces.
- Excite/enable local groups to make it happen. The access issue must be dealt with locally and not from “the top”.

### Baroness Barbara Young The Woodland Trust

- Land use frameworks & strategies – aiming for 30% of land protected for nature by 2030, with the land managed for biodiversity as the main purpose.
- There is a tension between biodiversity and other outcomes from land uses.
- A more holistic and inclusive approach is needed.
- Land is a fundamental pillar of the economy. Post war, the 3 big pillars of the economy were people & skills, capital investment and land. The land element has been forgotten about.



### Geeta Ludhra Lecturer and Chilterns Conservation Board

- What is British consciousness in relation to the countryside?
- Reflecting on being a second generation South Asian Hindu - spirituality and social prescribing is not new in relation to nature and the countryside. Faith and spirituality are the roots of ancestral wisdom of the global Southeast.
- Need to approach this through an intersectional lens – what does health and happiness mean? Different wants/needs for different people.

## Philip Merricks Farmer, National Nature Reserves – Kent Marshes

- Hills are a long way from people in the crowded south-east.
- North Kent marshes welcome 30,000 people year, but we are within an hour of ten million people.
- The take home message was that landscapes and big skies are open to people and the importance of these things and mental health go hand in hand as per a Countryside Commission work that seems to have been forgotten about.

## Elizabeth Buchanan NFU Mutual

- We should recognise the role of faith.
- Reality is that integration is miles away. There is uncertainty and we need to address things that make us feel uncomfortable.
- Reflecting on a visit to Burnley with the (now) King.
- Realised there is a barrier between the people of Burnley and the surrounding countryside, Exacerbated by difference in race, faith, and colour.
- Lot of people who are not white – how do we make them welcome in the countryside?



## Rob Hindle Rural Solutions

- Priority - place higher value on healthy soil.
- Symptom - poor public health.
- Cause – ultra high processed food.
- Remedy - policy must focus on healthy food via healthy soil – active food web is the foundation and enable farmers to focus on that.
- Priority - enable access to the countryside.
- Symptom – lots of people don't access the countryside.
- Cause – lack of infrastructure to support access.
- Remedy – focus on places where there is access infrastructure and space to get to easily from population centres for example Chatsworth and Blenheim.
- Remedy - interventions to ensure people feel supported to arrive and be welcomed - feels 'normal'.
- Remedy - access and arrival infrastructure – EV & car parking.
- Remedy - rural bus operators – must boost this.
- Find ways of getting services into those places with accessible landscapes.
- A philosophy for land use frameworks - 'Land shared means people spared'.

## James Bethell House of Lords

- Health Minister during the pandemic, which allowed him to see just how unhealthy this country is, especially in regard to obesity and mental health.
- There is a need to break down the barriers between town and country; a cultural change to re-establish the link between origins of food and health (personal & environmental). A real need for curators of the countryside, especially around food.
- During the pandemic, people wanted and needed green spaces, and still do as essential for good mental health.
- Health must be on any agenda for any discussions on the countryside.
- Hard to connect, show and tell, access to learning - chunk up the benefits.



## Sue Pritchard Food, Farming and Countryside Commission

- We need land use framework pilots for practical things that need to be done.
- A framework that deals with evidence and also describes a leadership facilitation process at a local level, where complex issues get resolved and decisions made, such as use of contested spaces.
- Evidence, research, data.



## Sarah Bell Farmer

- Plea for baselining; unless we know where to start, how will we know where we are going?
- We need markets to be created.
- Agriculture and food systems are locked in by the capital that is required to be involved.
- We need a business model for agricultural outcomes with value attached to the important outputs, for example, trees.
- We must not build the next retail supply chain of the future on environmental goods or via carbon.
- The culture of farming is part of agriculture, and we must ensure that culture survives and invest with imagination and equity.

## Kevin Bishop Dartmoor National Park

- ‘Dartmoor in London’ - open farm operated by DNP.
- Dartmoor farmers staff it – funding from Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) to resource this.
- Helps to break down barriers - welcomes thousands of school children for educational purposes, but there is a need for further resources for educational trips to the countryside & natural history education.
- The Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS) have no access element.
- With access rights, come responsibilities - higher profile for Countryside Code.



## Judy Ling Wong Black Environment Network

- Science tells us that all of society is one ecosystem that expresses the full range of what human beings can be.
- Connecting cultures and taking the best bit from each will allow us to find something within ourselves that we didn't know existed.

## Polly Martin National Trails UK

- Important that we invest in national trails and create an access infrastructure that will take pressure off the NHS with a £167 million saving.
- There is enormous value in protected landscapes.
- National Trails receive one year's funding at a time, so it is important to fit spending and activity into a very tight window; projects delivered within a year, which makes ambitious projects difficult to deliver. Needs a longer-term view.
- There are 83 million visitors to the trails a year.
- £533 million of visitor spend along these trails, which in turn will create jobs and opportunities.



**Ben Glasson**  
**Farmer, Monkside Farm**

- During Covid, with extended Permitted Development rights to 56 days - created a small pop-up campsite which brought in a broader demographic of guests who might normally have travelled overseas, and in turn led to partnerships with MIND and schools for “a night under the stars”.
- Permitted development has now reverted back to 28 days.
- There is growing support to bring back the extended PD for pop-ups and temporary land use, which would increase diversity and offer more mental health benefits.

**Hector Gibson Fleming**  
**Wessex Internet & Branson Farm**

- Access, nutritious food, landscape and biodiversity aims can conflict.
- Government to engage locally on food and farm.
- Connectivity is key - 5G trials.

**Christopher Hinch**  
**Farmer**

- Planning permission is the biggest barrier, creating challenges and preventing development for diversification in the current planning system as there are so many hoops to jump through and the cost is prohibitive.



**John Everitt**  
**National Forest**

- Must plan for and have access to funding. This is inherent in schemes with farmers and landowners, and must be managed and maintained.
- We need to join up planning and funding policies for health, wellbeing, and education to drive funding and access.

## John Watkins

### National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

- We are being channelled into a discussion about capital and value – must not forget the beauty and the inherent value in that.
- There needs to be a defence and celebration of natural beauty as there is too much talk about net gain and capital rather than natural beauty.
- There is an issue regarding planning. 25 hectares of AONB are developed as low-density, executive homes each year. The current planning policy is not being protective.
- Areas need resources.
- 34 AONB's = 15% of land and share government funding which is equivalent to 1 large secondary school, which begs the question; how important are they seen as really?



## Craig Bennett

### The Wildlife Trusts

- There are more nature reserves than there are McDonald's restaurants.
- 60% of the population lives within 3 miles of a reserve.
- Successful interventions, help and support are needed to actively increase access for excluded groups to get to the countryside with groups such as Black Girls Hike.
- Department of Health and Education as well as DEFRA need to support access to the countryside; there is a lot more for the government to do.
- Excellent recommendations in Food Strategy and Glover Report that should be implemented.



## Keynote Address

**Thérèse Coffey MP**  
**Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs**

To view the full speech, please see [here](#).

- The countryside is the bedrock of our story, rightly famous around the world for its beauty. It is a part of what makes our country such a great place to live.
- Our countryside makes up over 90% of our land. This is a living, breathing, vibrant place that adds so much to the health and happiness of millions every year and over £250 billion to our economy in England alone - thanks to the hard work and dedication of the nearly 10 million people who are proud to call this home.
- Government has already helped rural businesses through business rate relief, financial support to keep things like the network of rural post offices open. We're continuing to do so. We've got £3.2 billion a year supporting farmers, £2.6 billion in the Shared Prosperity Fund and the £110 million of the Rural England Prosperity Fund that we are deploying.
- To complement that today, and because of the potential we know exists, I'm pleased that the government is publishing Unleashing Rural Opportunity, which outlines some of the work we've already done and some new initiatives to help grow the economy, increase connectivity, introduce affordable housing, and strengthen our rural communities.
- Environmental improvement plan requirement to provide access to green and blue spaces within 15 minutes of peoples' homes. We have over 140,000 miles of public rights



of way in England and Wales alone and we are extending the deadline to 2031 to register more. When complete next year we will have the longest coastal path in the world. That level of access is extraordinary.

- Respect for rural communities needs to be reinforced. We have made a lot of progress in supporting rural communities to prosper since 2010. We see very high rates of employment in the countryside. But it can hide pockets of poverty and in particular low pay, where there are some of the lowest salaries in the country - the area represented by the Prime Minister has the third lowest median salary in the country.
- A focus on digital connectivity. You should be able to run a financial services company or



**The countryside is a living, breathing, vibrant place that adds so much to the health and happiness of millions every year and over £250 billion to our economy in England alone**

an architectural practice at the top of a remote valley just as well as you can in a town. And that in turn will create more of the jobs we need in the countryside, as well as making it easier to give young people the wider educational and vocational opportunities they need, close to where they live, paying more and without having to factor in an expensive commute into their working day.

- We also want to make sure that people can get a home. The affordability of homes is really challenging. That includes making it easier for farmers to convert their disused farm buildings. We're also funding a new team of rural housing enablers right across England to support new schemes and boost the supply of new affordable housing to rent for rural communities.
- We are investing £110 million through the new Rural England Prosperity Fund, and we are going to be helping those who have furthest to travel to college each day by increasing our funding for bursaries for 16 to 19-year-olds by 10% for the next year.
- In terms of transport and connectivity, getting to work is absolutely key and we should just accept that most people in the countryside do and will continue to drive. But quite rightly, we know that people want to be able to travel by buses too, particularly as people get older in life.
- I'm expecting more work to be coming through specifically on how we support rural communities. Coming back to the villages, the hamlets, the market towns, quite a lot of this is about 'is the pub the hub?' or 'is the village hall the hub?'. As far as I'm concerned, it could be both and anything - anything that brings people together, brings communities together to enjoy that way of life.
- The countryside should not be preserved in aspic. It should be a living, working, thriving place where we are "unleashing Rural Opportunity".



## Keynote Address

### **Peter Mandelson House of Lords**

When over a decade ago the Spectator magazine portrayed me on their front cover as Farmer Mandelson – I had suggested in an interview with Fraser Nelson that I wanted my post government life to be spent on a farm - I did not imagine that I would be speaking at such an inaugural Future Countryside event today.

- The countryside doesn't belong to any one party. It is there for all the people of Britain, not just those who live in it. And the countryside was, is and will be a Labour cause just as much as it is anyone else's. As Keir Starmer said to the NFU annual conference a year after he became leader: "I want there to be a new relationship between the Labour Party and British farming and between Labour and rural communities". This history is in my DNA. My grandfather Herbert Morrison, first as Labour's leader in London and then as Clement Attlee's Deputy Prime Minister, brought about the creation of the green belt.
- People who live in rural constituencies have the same hopes and concerns as those who live in our towns and cities. They want well-paying jobs, an affordable home in which to live, a good local school for their children, a first-rate health service that is there for them. And in common with those who live in the towns and cities, they currently feel let down.
- I see a Conservative Party which has taken rural Britain for granted. It has assumed it can Hoover up rural votes at election times but has shown little coherent idea about the



countryside between elections. It has chased trade deals which let farmers down. It is currently trying to rip up environmental standards in law. It has no great vision of the sort we saw from that 1945 Labour government about the importance of the beauty of our finest landscapes, or about public pleasure and well-being. It seems that rural voters are as ready for change as anyone.

- I know that in this room there are experts on rural issues, brimming with ideas to make our countryside better. And that's a great thing. But, as with so much of our public discourse, if we are not careful the narrative on the

countryside can be relentlessly negative. We hear that nature is depleted. Green spaces are threatened. Farmers are tearing up hedgerows or poisoning the soil. And so it goes on. And in this fog of criticism, it is perhaps hard for us to see an important truth. A truth that visitors to our country perceive straight away, but we perhaps take too much for granted, and this is that our countryside remains utterly magnificent, not just beautiful and iconic, but visibly far better managed, building on centuries of care.

- Those who live and work in the countryside aren't always right, and all of us should be open to change. But in essence the countryside — as the official adverts promoting Britain tell us — is great. And this is a reminder that the people who live and work in the countryside, and especially the successive generations of farmers who produce food and who are the land's principal custodians, by and large know what they are doing. I think we need to remember this when we frame policy.
- The perception that politicians who neither represent nor understand the countryside want to impose or assert control, and that we fail to listen, has I think added to a sense in rural Britain of 'them and us'. And this is why I welcome this event. Because it embraces the idea of a common purpose. That what unites us in caring about the countryside is more important than what might divide us, that everyone has a part to play in the national debate about the countryside. That good policy solutions for food, or nature, or water, or health will best be reached by discussion and agreement, not by conflict. The countryside is, as we have been hearing today, truly a national asset. And so, it should be something whose future matters to all of us. A point of unity, not division.
- I hope the next government will resist single issue agendas and shape an optimistic, positive, and inclusive agenda for the countryside. An agenda about better food, restoring nature, opening access to people in cities who do not think the countryside is for them. An agenda "for" the countryside, not a plan to be inflicted "on" the countryside. That is the spirit in which my grandfather and his generation of Labour approached the cause.
- It was based on a simple understanding. That the countryside is a national asset. That it is held in trust by its present owners but ultimately belongs to us all. That we all therefore have a responsibility to care for it. And that a national government must speak for it.

“

**The countryside doesn't belong to any one party. It is there for all the people of Britain, not just those who live in it.**

## Session 2:

# A Productive Countryside

Chaired by Julia Aglionby  
Uplands Alliance

## What must change so the countryside can thrive economically and environmentally?

Opening address

Jonty Brunyee  
Head of Sustainable Farming and Food Systems at FarmED - The  
Centre for Farm and Food Education

### A Farmer's perspective on what we need for a productive countryside

- The solution is agroecological farming, stacked enterprises and systems which include access and education - small scale farming.
- Synthesis, co-creation of knowledge and food culture.
- Do not need sustainable intensification – land share, not land spare.
- Agroecology as the pedagogy is where we need to be.
- What we are told we need from government and policy:
  - Less red tape.
  - Access to labour.
  - Trade deals that support British farming.





- But a productive countryside needs these things:
  - Thriving ecosystem (healthy soil, pollinators, farmland birds), that are connected at a landscape scale, not islands of ecosystems. It is not great currently due to poor soil health and the loss of species.
  - More diversity - not only people, but enterprise, crops, livestock, habitats.
  - Stack enterprises – new people coming in, poly cropping not mono cropping, diverse local food systems, that we can sell and eat, embraces outcomes not just outputs.
  - More people, not robots, with the right knowledge and skills, growing food and creating value at the bottom end of the chain with value floating up the chain, also deep-thinking agroecologist farmers and entrepreneurs with the right ethos.
  - National farm entry scheme – with regeneration comes improved farming, tourism, leadership, rebuilding and reconnection.
  - Rural housing – this is a real problem as no homes = no staff/labour.
  - Fair rewards for what we do and produce – half of the farmers will be bankrupt in the next 5 years, BPS will go, ELMS will falter and the return on capital is low. To combat this, we will need shorter supply chains, more local infrastructure such as abattoirs, mills etc.
  - Labelling regulations to help consumers find what products they want and that the right products stand out, so that consumer confusion is abated. There needs to also be a business rate relief for small businesses that use





- and sell local food.
- Agri-environmental schemes that work – reward me for the basics first along with enhancements. Those that have done good work are penalised under the ELMS system: maintenance should be paid for first, not second as those that have been doing it for years are penalised as there is less enhancement.
- There is a need for landlord support through BNG, investing in buildings, nutrient neutrality, biodiversity credits and investment in buildings.
- Access to more land – we are surrounded by land being managed improperly but we cannot access it.
- More tax incentives to encourage landlords to let land such as smaller farms for agroecological purposes.
- Knowledge exchange, peer to peer learnings, shared experiences, more farm education is needed, such as Groundswell and Oxford Real Farming conferences to give us that knowledge.
- With these things I can produce:
  - More food.
  - More environmental outcomes.
  - More jobs.
  - More returns (greater viability).

“

**Farmers need fair rewards for what they do, and what they produce. BPS will go, ELMS will falter and the return on capital is low. To combat this, we will need shorter supply chains and more local infrastructure.**



## From the floor

### Elaine King Chilterns Conservation Board

- The countryside is something that is treated as a luxury and more importantly the funding and policies for it, by politicians.
- The Dasgupta review has gone very quiet, why is this as we have so much information. Why aren't we using it?
- On the flip side – the countryside should not be a battleground at the next General Election.
- Focus on enabling long term strategic decisions.
- There is a somewhat naïve ideology that if politics are involved, there will be better outcomes.
- There is a long-term view needed beyond electoral cycles; a need to recognise and fully connect.



### Will McBain ARUP

- The Earth Commission Report states we have exceeded 7 out of 8 planetary boundaries, which means we will need 2.5 planets to keep living at our current level/way of life.
- Nutrients and fresh water are the key assets.
- How can the countryside help to tackle planetary boundaries. We should be using political and fiscal directives to tackle these issues, not relying on the markets.

### Alistair Driver Rewilding Britain

- One will find there is a massive disconnect around political ambition and the biodiversity crisis.
- A list of small policy tweaks from SoS, but change comes from demonstrating real progress/best practice.
- There are a lot of good examples of opportunities being created. Real change comes from demonstrating best practices such as nature friendly farming, rewilding and conservation. We need a jigsaw puzzle – not one system against another.
- Every piece is essential, the whole is much greater than the sum of the parts.





**Richard Beddon**  
**Retired Tenant Farmer**

- Plea: Stop perceiving the countryside as a problem. The countryside is the solution. Please listen to those that do the delivery on the ground.
- Environmental sustainability is underpinned by economics. There is only focus on the outcomes, not the outputs.
- DEFRA was set up to assemble rural delivery. This has clearly failed and a review from agencies is very much overdue.

**Liz Bowles**  
**Farm Carbon Toolkit**

- There needs to be a focus on the farmers as the solution to climate change through the ability to store carbon in soil and non-crop biomass – food and climate are the fundamentals of life.
- What must happen to thrive economically? Whole supply chain has to work together.

**Martin Collett**  
**English Rural Housing Association**

- Fundamental need for more affordable homes. Building 10 affordable homes generates 24 jobs, which in turn, generates £1.4 million for each community. The question is, how do we get them?

**Theresa Dent**  
**Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust**

- Building wildlife collaboration at landscape scale through farm clusters, now building environmental farmer groups working up to catchment scale.
- Farmers, gamekeepers, moorland managers all working for clean water, net zero carbon farming, peatland restoration.
- 4 groups with 350 farmers joined or expressing interest.
- Do this at a scale that makes a significant and measurable contribution and enable access to new forms of green finance. Brokering access to environmental markets.
- Those participating take pride in environmental achievements.

**Mohammed Dhalech**  
**MOSAIC outdoors**

- Different communities are using countryside in different ways.
- Later in the day the audience is very culturally different but, in the evening, there are no rangers, no cafes, no ice cream vans so this more diverse market is not being catered for.
- Need to look at the business model, if you want to increase access, you need to change the way you work to respond to diverse customers.

**Rachel Branton**  
**Visit Britain**

- £30 bn inbound tourism spend, but only 50% get beyond London.
- In order to access this market we need:
  - Infrastructure – enable access to countryside locations for inbound visitors.
  - Products, activities, and services for them to access and spend money on.
  - Promotion – market what we have to underserved markets.

**Barnaby Briggs**  
**Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust**

- People protect what they love.
- Countryside looks lovely but we need to understand what we have lost. The crux of the problem needs to be understood to fix it.
- Focus on the reality of the problem, don't gloss over issues in favour of a landscape that looks the way people like it.

**Judicaelle Hammond**  
**Country Land and Business Association**

- 28.1% people employed in rural areas in micro businesses. 23% of all registered businesses are in countryside – that is 500,000 businesses in rural areas, some engaging communities as place makers, others resilient but don't feel in control of their destinies.
- Design policies for small businesses – people without time and capacity to deal with multiple bodies.
- Engage in a way that is timely and relevant – in a way small business can understand.
- Resource and fund properly – these are complex issues.

## Jake Fiennes Holkham Estate

- You will never sit in a room of such influential people in the countryside.
- Ask yourself – what does good look like?
- At the moment, the policy determines what good looks like.
- Threads that weave the patchwork.
- Policy needs to back the change underway – flexible, adaptable, deliverable.
- If we put our collective minds together and leave our baggage at the door – this could be a Good Friday Agreement moment.
- Make fit for purpose, fit for people, and fit for planet - not just fit for us – we should have no pre-conception of what future countryside should look like.

## Alan Laidlaw Royal Highland & Agricultural Society Scotland

- Enabling finance is needed to grow the pie.
- Create the conditions to fail fast and learn – the same things have been being talked about for 20 years.
- The Establishment has slowed progress, but younger people involved now in these older organisations are driving change.
- We need a simple vision – farmers do not have a clear steer on where they need to be heading.
- Need to be able to talk to the public such as through local shows which celebrate the sector and are a vehicle for knowledge transfer.



## Susan Aubrey-Cound Countryside Alliance

- The countryside is a landscape of communities.
- Local land management makes up 5% of rural employment, the countryside hosts 19% of UK population and 25% of VAT-able businesses.
- Enable enterprise and diversification.
- Better transport to get to jobs such as Wheels to Work.
- Housing – invent council houses in the countryside (adapt right to buy).
- Solving rural housing will unlock the rural vote.

## Session 3:

# A Vibrant Countryside

Chaired by: Fiona Reynolds  
Chair, National Audit Office

## What would make the countryside a better place to live in, work in, invest in and to enjoy?

Opening address

Daniel Zeichner  
Shadow Environment Minister

How do we protect the countryside whilst bringing it alive?

- How do we protect the countryside whilst bringing it alive when it is not just one countryside but many different areas that need to be accommodated, such as different histories, cultures, economies, geologies, topographies, and soil types, yet it is often treated as though it were one thing.
- We should make more use of Parish Councils, as they have far more depth of local knowledge and differences matter at hyper local level. We should keep looking at appropriate devolution in England.
- Economic differences matter as places that have been historically poorer, often still are today. There are rural places demonstrating real economic decline.





- Recently visited Cornwall and in the town, there was no hustle and bustle - shops are struggling and there is nothing open in the evening, and nothing for young people to do.
- A different experience in Suffolk where there was visibility more wealth and a more diverse and active community.
- We need a productive working countryside, as a vibrant and good place to live and work.
- We can't go on overspending capital the way we have been. We need to understand what a 21st century countryside looks like with some form of agricultural transition, with food production remaining central, but we must find ways to do this in a far more sustainable and environmental way.
- We want the new Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS) to be a success and there is a large amount of money going through the systems in place.
- But there is a real worry about farmers leaving the industry and that ELMS is not funding food production properly. Less food is being produced and farmers are struggling as the economics just don't add up.
- The farming Exit Scheme has facilitated 2000 farmers to leave the industry.
- The Entry Scheme is still only a pilot, but we are aware of lots of young people who would like to enter the sector and yet there is no route for them.
- The rural community is about more than farming - tourism, hospitality (although there is a massive issue with lack of staff for hospitality businesses) and digital all contribute.
- The conventional narrative is about protecting the countryside from people, but we should be putting the people back in, although environmental and anti-social behaviour does not help the argument.
- We need a pledge to buy, make and sell more in our rural communities.
- And this needs a more interventionist government to engage, rather than leave to the market.

## From the floor

### Margaret Clark Rural Services Network

- We need a holistic strategic policy around what 'good' for the countryside should be.
- Much more strategic and comprehensive approach - not rural as an add on.
- Government has a responsibility to lead but cannot be the answer alone.
- Aim to make rural proofing redundant.
- Rural affordable housing – if every village took half a dozen affordable homes, we would go a long way to solving the problem. But the case made is always for why they shouldn't be there, rather than why they should.



### Jack Hanbury Farmer

- How to deliver what all the single-issue groups want as a land manager when they all want conflicting things.
- CAP reform proposal was around delivery of public benefit – difficult to measure - then opportunity missed.
- Prescriptive system – takes away ambition as a tick box system.
- Should be incentivised for doing more – reward-based system - delivers diversity.
- Collaboration – club together to deliver more benefit.

### Bennet Northcote Freelance sustainability consultant

- Think through nature positive opportunity lens. Stop thinking about selves as custodians of the countryside but as parts of a rural economy. Innovation needs to be part of all thinking.
- How do you incentivise nature positive opportunities? We should look at ourselves like the car sector who are always innovating.



## May Smith McDonald's Progressive Young Farmer

- We need education and respect – we haven't taught our children where food comes from.
- How can we expect them to respect the rules of the countryside when they don't know anything about it.
- Education from the start is needed.

## Nicholas Boys Smith Create Streets

- Lack of people is the same as lack of homes. Difficulty of getting things built in the countryside.
- The planning system is run in a curious way. Very unclear about what is suitable to develop.
- House building concentrated on a few big players. Pre-planning risk can only be taken by the big developers.
- How can we create planning certainty to enable people to pursue planning with clarity about what we can and can't do where.
- Housing targets and how they are distributed should be reviewed. Targets are needed but need to be distributed in a sensible way rather than the Call for Sites approach.
- Cost of diversification is prohibitive - hundreds of thousands of pounds and years to get planning in some cases.



## James Murray Business Green

- It is a certainty that we will see an increase in fire, flood - terrifying environmental issues.
- We know that is locked in - we should focus on net zero above all else and we need to move faster.
- Politicians appear complacent on this.
- Massive opportunity to use green revolution to revitalise countryside.
- Inertia in public life – defining issue of the age.

## Dustin Benton Green Alliance

- Climate – what will make the countryside a better place?
- Change – we have only asked food from the land and undervalued the other natural processes.
- What is missing is the ability to monetise this and increase the pace of change.
- We need 2% of England to change from intensive farming to eco-agri each year.
- 2% of land for housing over same period.
- £2 billion of extra value from improved environmental quality.

## Ben Eagle Rural Pod Media

- Pub closures remain an issue.
- Examples of villagers buying pubs and establishing a Community Interest Company and integrating village shop.
- Remember to foster community ownership.
- Support local pubs.

## Kathryn Moore West Midlands National Park

- Think of landscape as the infrastructure on which we depend for everything – food, air, water, enjoyment, health.
- Only way we can overcome the global issues is to treat it as critical infrastructure.
- Lots of the issues apply equally in urban areas.



## Michael Cocklestone RSPB

- We already have many of the answers we are looking for.
- Lots of reports, have the answers, need to implement the recommendations that come from the body of work that exists - e.g. Dasgupta.
- Need to take a new perspective, a different lens, a long view.





### Zoe Henderson Natural Resources Wales

- We must work with rural communities.
- Rural people feel under attack – single issue bans on things that happen in the countryside.
- Instead - collaborate with them.
- Most country people know where change is needed and what to do so bring that expertise together.
- Rather than single issue banning – look for middle way.

### Alison Barnes New Forest National Park Authority

- Everything happens in a place and a landscape.
- These places are assets and need to be understood as such, whatever we are designing them for.
- This requires you to think what and who you need in your team to deliver for this place.
- What will be our framework and what freedom will we have?
- And what planning mechanism will enable this?
- What is the ethos of this 'team' in the room?



### Amber Reid National Lottery Heritage Fund

- Personal experience of an inaccessible countryside.
- Making it known what is available is a good place to start. Places where people power is needed and lots of people looking for things to put their hands to. People want to apply themselves, but they don't know what opportunities there are in the countryside.
- People flock towards cities without knowing the opportunities are in the countryside as they don't know what is there.
- Give young people somewhere to sleep in exchange for work to enable a more diverse group of people to be involved.



**Roger Mortlock**  
**Campaign to Protect Rural England**

- We need policy integration.
- Still looking at land use policy in boxes – we need a land use framework to unpack this.
- Peri urban land important, opportunity to rethink this area in a different way. The work of the West Midlands National Park is showing how this can be done.

**Dimitri Houtart**  
**BBC**

- Grew up in the countryside and would have liked his children to have the same opportunity.
- Doesn't feel possible – the reason is that one of my daughters severely disabled, and my wife doesn't drive so we cannot access the services we need.
- Solutions – public transport. Investment in buses doesn't work.
- Demand responsive services – should be explored.
- Cherish community hospitals.

**Gareth Morgan**  
**The Soil Association**

- Peter Mandelson made a great speech then said everything is OK and nothing needs to change.
- We must call out the platitudes and redouble our efforts between environmental and farming communities.

**Simon James**  
**The Plunkett Foundation**

- Support for rural communities to set up and run businesses.
- Rural businesses in community ownership, both retaining and protecting but taking into modern age.
- Every community needs more housing, affordable and commercial.
- New settlements and better planning to enable small villages and hamlets to have small numbers of small houses.

**Maxwell Ayamba**  
**Sheffield Environmental Movement**

- Media narrative – needs to educate.
- The media shape the story of the countryside – what do we want to say the story is?



**Geeta Ludhra**  
**Lecturer and Chilterns Conservation Board**

- Live work invest enjoy – diverse ways in which these verbs can manifest.
- More effort needs to be put into a welcome into the countryside for BAME.
- Is the countryside ready to move with the times and nurture and accommodate? Get comfortable with being uncomfortable.
- Diverse ways to invest in the countryside. Told by institutions how to enjoy. Ignores faith, spiritual religious elements.



**Sophie Ascroft**  
**McDonald's Progressive Young Farmer**

- Social Media – use social media as a tool to engage young people and showcase what the countryside has to offer.

**Chris Woodley Stewart**  
**North Pennines AONB Partnership**

- Traineeships for young people.
- Can we have a government led national rural apprenticeship for farming, conservation etc.
- Needs major investment.
- £100 million – think big.



## Closing Remarks

### Heather Hancock Event Rapporteur

- Immediate reflections – try to sum up the day, not cover everything.
- With a focus on things that need more content to fill out the discussion.
- What was a signal and what was a noise – reflect on this.
- Further feedback welcome.
- We should feel fortunate – not many parts of our national enterprise hold such power/ influence over people.
- Great opportunity to explain, drive understanding, build trust.
- This is a rare moment – there have not been many times when the countryside mattered so much in the political cycle - seize this opportunity.
- To quote Margaret Clarke – we need strategy not just vision.
- What we didn't surface enough today – what does that approach look like?
- Strategy means choice – we can't do everything all at once.
- How we make those choices – what will make the 'best difference'.
- Struck that the politicians talked more about the people than the people in the room did.
- Solutions – owned, shaped, and delivered by rural communities.
- Rural communities to own the story. Have to find a way of hearing their voice and enabling.
- Limitations of a national framework policy.



**What we need is trust, understanding and a coming together of minds. And soon as we are not blessed with time.**



- More on how to build local action at scale.
- Takeaway – remember the countryside is not ‘over there’ – should start on everyone’s doorstep in some dimension.
- We need to get granular on conditions for success.
- Farms are businesses – focus on enterprise.
- There is a missing generation in the countryside – missing the 25–50-year-olds to deliver to these challenges – how do we fill that gap?
- Didn’t surface sufficiently – over reliance on public money?
- Development controls – need to look at how we enable what we need.
- Education and health inequalities must be addressed.
- Building trust and understanding.
- Don’t let best be the enemy of good.
- We all want to head in similar direction.
- What we need is trust, understanding and a coming together of minds. And soon – as we are not blessed with time.



“

**There was a compelling energy and sense of urgency in the room, with a clear shared desire for a vibrant future for the countryside, an acknowledgement of the challenges, opportunities and a wide range of priorities. It was a hugely rich conversation which underlined the call to arms to all of us to act, and to recognise we cannot ‘have it all’ and choices will need to be made. Sincere thanks are due to everyone who participated on the day, and since the event and we look forward to continuing this important conversation.**



# Rural Solutions

At Rural Solutions, our vision is for a progressive and vibrant rural Britain. A land of renewal, innovation, and resilience, where businesses succeed, communities flourish, new ideas prosper, landscapes and heritage are cherished, and natural resources regenerated.

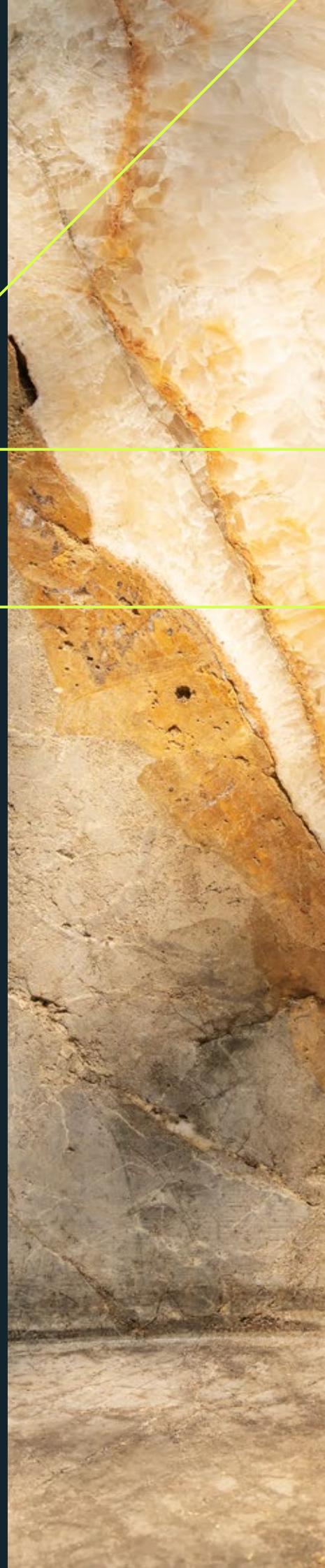
We work with forward thinking owners and managers of rural land and property to create remarkable spaces and enterprises which enable people and places to thrive. We help unlock the potential of rural land and property assets to create value for those who own and manage them. By doing so, we create places for people to live, work and enjoy the countryside.

That is why we are delighted to support Future Countryside to curate this vital conversation about how we can create the conditions for a vibrant rural future.

To learn more about our work, please visit our website.

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**A different view**





# Future Countryside: Event Digest

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Future  
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