

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE: RURAL COMMUNITIES

General Brief

November 2023

Key points

- **Persistent pressure on the cost of living is being felt particularly keenly in rural communities.**
- **The Chancellor should maintain the current level of fuel duty, with the ostensibly temporary 5p cut intact. We also support the APPG for Rural Business and the Rural Powerhouse in calling for a rural housing strategy and seek measures to support rural transport and renewable energy generation on brownfield and industrial sites.**
- **The Countryside Alliance welcomed the Prime Minister’s announcement in September that the mooted ban on like-for-like replacements of oil boilers would be put off until 2035. Given continued pressure on heating oil prices, the VAT rate on domestic heating oil should be cut to zero.**
- **Funds must be apportioned fairly to rural communities, with the process of distribution rural-proofed to serve rural communities better. Promoting and embedding rural proofing should sit at the heart of government in the Cabinet Office.**
- **Public procurement should celebrate game meat and push for it to be on the menu. Promoting venison and encouraging an increase in the UK deer cull should be a straightforward and wholly positive policy.**
- **The Countryside Alliance is fervently opposed to attacks on UK livestock farming, which operates to among the highest standards of sustainability and animal welfare in the world. We organised motions passed by local authorities pledging to support their local food and farming sectors and procure their produce where possible, including meat and dairy products.**

Contents

Background	2
The rural premium	2
Energy costs.....	3
Local authority funding	4
Planning and solar farms.....	4
Public food procurement.....	5

Background

- This briefing has been prepared in advance of three Westminster Hall debates scheduled for the week commencing 27 November:
 - [Government support for rural communities](#), Sarah Dyke MP, Tuesday 28 November, 16:00-17:00
 - [Funding of rural councils](#), Chris Loder MP, Wednesday 29 November, 09:30-11:00
 - [Public sector food procurement and nutrition standards](#), Anthony Mangnall MP, Wednesday 29 November, 16:30-17:30

The rural premium

- An inquiry by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Rural Business and the Rural Powerhouse reported in April that communities in the countryside are faced with what it terms a 'rural premium', the causes of which include lack of access to the lowest-cost food and resulting reductions in purchasing power, lack of access to cash arising from closures of banks and post offices, and higher transport costs.¹
- Persistent pressure on the cost of living is being felt particularly keenly in rural communities. Countryside Alliance research conducted at the height of the inflation crisis found that 45% of survey respondents reported greater anxiety and sleeplessness, more than three quarters saw their disposable income fall by at least 10% and those relying on heating oil have suffered a 50% increase in the cost to fill their tanks.²
- Other research we carried out last year found that rural households spend almost £800 a year more on fuel than people who live in urban areas, with petrol costing up to 6p per litre more. Defra figures suggest rural life necessitates longer journeys, with an average travelling distance per resident at 5,767 miles in 2020, compared with 3,624 miles for urban dwellers and 4,334 miles across England as a whole.
- The APPG's report quoted the warning in the evidence the Countryside Alliance submitted³ as to the *"risk to small local shops, farm shops and craft producers operating with higher production costs if consumers, having less disposable income, are forced to substitute cheaper, mass-produced goods and shop at larger discounted stores"*.
- The report also quoted the Alliance as saying, *"The need for more housing stock is not just an issue in towns and cities. Many rural areas are also suffering from a lack of housing, especially affordable housing. That shortage is one of the greatest challenges for communities across the country, including in rural areas."*

Countryside Alliance position

- In 2022 the fuel duty level was cut by 5p per litre, ostensibly for one year, but this was later extended until 2024. Given continued pressure on rural communities' finances, now is not the time to let the cut lapse, in effect raising fuel duty by 5p. The Chancellor should maintain the current level of fuel duty, with the 5p cut intact.

¹ The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Rural Business and the Rural Powerhouse, [The Rural Premium: Exploring the impact of the cost-of-living crisis in rural areas](#), 04.23

² Countryside Alliance, [Ranil Jayawardena appointed Defra Secretary](#), 07.09.22

³ Countryside Alliance Written Evidence, APPG for Rural Business and the Rural Powerhouse, [The Rural Premium: Exploring the impact of the cost-of-living crisis in rural areas](#), 11.22

- We are also longstanding campaigners for improved public transport options in rural areas, which could cut reliance on private transport, and for an adequate network of charging points including at people's homes, and a robust enough electric grid infrastructure to support the decarbonisation of transport in rural areas.
- Our concern over threats to rural businesses, coupled with our awareness of the critical role they can play in their communities, continues to inspire our promotion of the annual [Countryside Alliance Awards](#), which recently closed for nominations.
- We support the APPG for Rural Business and the Rural Powerhouse in its calls for the Government to draw up a dedicated rural housing strategy, including building targets for rural homes for sale and affordable rent across rural communities over the coming decade.

Energy costs

- According to the latest fuel poverty statistics (based on 2022 data), rural homes have a higher incidence of being off the gas grid – the survey showed 56.8% are off the gas grid, compared to just 9.0% of urban properties. Rural homes were also found to be much less energy efficient. Of households living in properties not on the gas grid, 20.1% are fuel poor compared to 12.3% on the gas grid.
- Households living in rural areas had the highest fuel poverty rate of 15.9% in 2022 and the largest fuel poverty gap at £956. This is the additional income which would be needed to bring a household to the point of not being fuel poor. Urban areas, by contrast, had a fuel poverty rate of 11.1% and a fuel poverty gap of less than half that amount.⁴
- Since the heights reached in March 2022 immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, domestic heating oil prices have dropped considerably. They have, however, yet to settle back to the levels seen before the conflict began and are still more than twice as high as they were two years ago.⁵

Countryside Alliance position

- As longstanding campaigners in support of people living in homes without a connection to the gas grid, the Countryside Alliance welcomed the Prime Minister's announcement in September that the mooted ban on like-for-like replacements of oil boilers would be put off until 2035, and homes that could not be reliably heated by other means will not be forced to switch at all.
- Concerns remain, however, about the affordability of heating oil.
- In recognition of the higher costs faced by those who rely on this fuel, we call on the Chancellor to use powers returned to the UK following our departure from the EU to reduce the VAT rate on domestic heating oil to zero.
- We would also like to see a cut in the VAT payable by rural businesses that use the fuel, which (above small quantities) is chargeable at the full rate of 20% since the reduced rate of 5% applies only to domestic properties.

⁴ DESNZ, [Annual Fuel Poverty Statistics in England, 2023 \(2022 data\)](#), 28.02.23

⁵ Boilerjuice, [UK Average Home Heating Oil Prices](#)

Local authority funding

- The UK Shared Prosperity Fund was launched in April 2022 as a domestic replacement for the European Structural and Investment Funds, with the objective of levelling up and creating opportunity for people and places across the UK. It is scheduled to provide £2.6 billion of new funding for local investment by March 2025, increasing to £1.5bn a year by 2024-25, allocated through a funding formula.
- Previous funding from the EU was distributed through the Local Enterprise Partnership network. That system did not serve rural communities well as urban areas received the lion's share of the funding mainly due to the makeup of the boards being urban-dominated.
- The Government has said that the new system *"will help people access opportunity in places in need, such as ex-industrial areas, deprived towns and rural and coastal communities, and for people in disadvantaged groups across the UK"*.⁶
- To access funding, places, led by local or combined regional authorities, will be required to submit an investment plan to the Government setting out their priorities for investment and the outcomes they are seeking to achieve.
- Separately, in September the Government created a £110 million Rural England Prosperity Fund, which is intended to improve rural productivity through investment grants to businesses, awarded by eligible local authorities. Such interventions are necessary to combat the productivity gap for rural areas, which has fallen from 90% of the England average in 2001 to 83% in 2019. Funds are set to be distributed from next April.

Countryside Alliance position

- Funds must be apportioned fairly to rural communities, with the process of distribution rural-proofed so it can serve rural communities better. The 'place-based' approach must recognise the diversity of our countryside and the capabilities and knowledge of those who live and work there. This would ensure that issues in the countryside, often more complicated than in urban areas, are tackled appropriately and resolved.
- Rural communities' needs should be at the heart of policy making in government. The responsibility for promoting and embedding rural proofing should therefore sit at the heart of government in the Cabinet Office. This will ensure the necessary resources and experience required to exert influence across government.
- The rural productivity gap illustrates that investment in growing rural productivity offers the opportunity to realise significant longer-term returns to the public purse.

Planning and solar farms

- Concern about planning issues in relation to solar farms arise from the finite area of land available within the UK and the competing interests of food production and food security, as well as the impact on communities founded on agriculture when land is taken out of production.
- The Government's food strategy, published in June 2022, aims at *"ensuring security and sustainability of food supply in an unpredictable world"*. It cites the UK Food Security report

⁶ DLUHC, [UK Community Renewal Fund: prospectus 2021-22](#), 11.05.23

from December 2021, which indicated that domestically we produce 60% by value of all the food we need, rising to 74% of food which we can grow or rear in the UK, with surpluses in lamb and milk and recent growth in sectors including poultry and soft fruit.⁷

- At the 2022 Party Conferences and the 2023 Liberal Democrat Spring Conference, the Countryside Alliance presented events entitled “Sustaining Rural Communities in the Carbon Trading Age”. They discussed how rural communities can remain sustainable at a time when land is increasingly being diverted away from productive agricultural use to support decarbonisation policies such as solar farms and tree planting for the sake of carbon abatement.
- The overwhelming message from audiences was that while everyone was supportive of the principle of solar energy, the clear message being sent back to politicians was that we need to think carefully about where we site solar farms, the planning regulations involved and how we can make better use of brownfield sites, existing buildings and new-build properties.⁸

Countryside Alliance position

- Energy security and food security are two key issues facing this country and must be tackled together, with the countryside playing its part to deliver sustainable environmental and economic growth.
- We recognise the importance of encouraging and supporting the growth of renewable energy projects; the UK needs a mix of sustainable energy to tackle the impact other energy sources have had on the environment.
- Solar energy is an important part of the UK’s sustainable energy mix and we must prioritise the growth of solar projects on brownfield sites, roofs and new-builds which should reduce the pressure for solar farms on productive agricultural land. As such, we supported the amendment to the Energy Bill tabled by Caroline Lucas MP that would have required new homes to carry solar panels on their roofs and developments to be planned effectively to maximise solar gain, as well as two amendments tabled by Wera Hobhouse MP containing measures to support householders with solar panels.
- The clustering of developments around sub-stations has consequences for local landscapes and amenities, and the cumulative effect intensifies the harm caused.
- We agree with the Farming Minister, Mark Spencer MP, that other government priorities, including the drive towards net zero carbon emissions, can only be sustained as long as there is food on the shelves.

Public food procurement

- Alongside its food strategy, the Government published a consultation on public sector food and catering policy, which ran until 4 September 2022. The consultation covered plans to:
 - Promote procurement of local, sustainable, healthier food and catering;
 - Open up public sector supply chains to a wider range of companies, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), to better support local economies, increase resilience, and encourage food producers to innovate;

⁷ Defra, [Government food strategy](#), 13.06.22

⁸ Countryside Alliance, [Will more solar farms impact the future of farming and agriculture?](#), 27.01.23

- Increase transparency of food supply chains to drive continuous improvement and build our understanding of what is bought, served, sold and wasted in the public sector; and
 - Provide guidance and standards that are simple and engaging, reflect latest scientific evidence and national sustainability priorities and align with other policies such as on waste and diet.
- In March 2021 the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee published a report following an inquiry into public sector food procurement. Among other things, the Committee recommended that access to procurement contracts be widened for smaller, local suppliers without delay. The Government responded that it was committed to doing so.
 - Early versions of the strategy are reported to have recommended an “*increase [to] the use of responsibly sourced wild venison*”. Although this did not survive into the published edition, the proposed new policy does include a requirement for menus to be varied throughout the year to include foods in season, citing venison during the winter as one example.
 - Proponents of a document styled as the ‘Plant-Based Treaty’ have been lobbying councils to adopt independent food and farming policies that directly discriminate against livestock farming, meat and dairy.⁹ Other organisations supporting this campaign or otherwise attacking animal agriculture include the Extinction Rebellion offshoot Animal Rising¹⁰.
 - More recently, however, councils taking a more supportive stance towards the sector have begun passing a Countryside Alliance-sponsored motion calling for catering at council-organised events to be sourced from local producers, including meat, seafood, and dairy options, alongside plant-based produce. This month Portsmouth City Council joined Suffolk, Cornwall and North Northamptonshire in passing a related motion.¹¹

Countryside Alliance position

- Any steps to improve access to public procurement contracts for smaller businesses would be most welcome. A new procurement framework will ideally recognise the value of promoting local food and drink, given its economic and environmental benefits. These include supporting the diversification of farms and producer businesses, creating additional demands for skills and training, and reducing food miles and carbon emissions.
- The strategy is right to recognise that promoting local food and drink can also increase cultural identity and community pride. This in turn makes an area a more attractive tourist offer, while also ensuring the resilience of the local food supply and supporting farmers and small producers.
- Public procurement should celebrate game meat and push for it to be on the menu. There has already been a trial of six NHS Trusts piloting pheasant, partridge and venison on their menus as part of a project driven by British Game Assurance. Game meat is perfect for

⁹ Countryside Alliance, [David Bean: Imposing a vegetarian diet on Scots would be an environmental disaster](#), 16.03.23

¹⁰ Animal Rebellion, [Tweet](#), 12.04.23

¹¹ Countryside Alliance, [Portsmouth becomes first city to back Alliance campaign for farmers in face of vegan trend](#), 15.11.23

many hospital patients as it is nutritionally superior and higher in selenium than other meats. In tests, it was also easy to consume for patients with swallowing problems.

- There are more deer in the UK than at any time since the Norman conquest and, in many places, densities are far too high and have a serious impact on fragile habitats. Their clearing of woodland understory and undergrowth and browsing of trees has been linked to declines in several species including the nightingale, willow tit and woodcock.
- Meanwhile, replacing intensively-farmed meat with local venison in a diet benefits both the environment by reducing carbon emissions and public health as venison is low in saturated fat and high in vitamins and minerals. Promoting venison and encouraging an increase in the UK deer cull should, therefore, be a straightforward and wholly positive policy.
- The Countryside Alliance is fervently opposed to attacks on UK livestock farming, which operates to among the highest standards of sustainability and animal welfare in the world. British beef production, for instance, is about half as carbon-intensive as the global average.¹²
- We organised and promoted the motions passed recently by several local authorities pledging to support their local food and farming sectors and seek to procure their produce where possible, including meat and dairy products.
- More broadly, it should not be for local authorities to operate independent food and farming policies characterised by attacks on livestock farming. We would support national action to prevent councils from instituting such policies, operating along similar lines to the prohibition on supporting boycott campaigns against Israel that Parliament is currently considering in the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill.

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¹² Committee on Climate Change, [Land use: Policies for a Net Zero UK](#), 01.20